

THE PMC THAT IS NEITHER PRIVATE NOR A COMPANY:
HOW THE WAGNER GROUP REVOLUTIONIZED RUSSIA'S QUASI-PMC MODEL

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THESIS

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Executive Summary

While the Wagner Group was Russia's first irregular military formation to attract widespread international attention, the history of private and semi-private force in Russia stretches back to the early 1990s. This history differs in important ways from the history of private force in Western countries. Unlike other strong states with well-developed conventional militaries, Russia has been reluctant to provide clear legal frameworks for private and semi-private purveyors of force. Private security companies (PSCs) played a vital role in Russia's crackdown on organized crime in the 1990s and early 2000s, but private military companies (PMCs) remain explicitly prohibited by Russian law. Despite the widespread tendency to refer to the Wagner Group as a PMC, it has never been fully private, nor has it been a discrete legal entity. In the decade following the Wagner Group's emergence in 2014, Yevgeny Prigozhin and other Wagner Group curators created a new template for semi-private force that is poised to remain a central feature of Russia's surrogate warfare strategy in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa.

The Wagner Group began as a small-scale experiment to deploy experienced Russian fighters under the cover of plausible deniability in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region. However, the organization quickly expanded in scale and became a vital source of income and influence for the Kremlin, offering sanctions-proof revenue streams through energy and resource contracts, as well as a plausibly deniable option to develop relationships with African governments. In the months following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Yevgeny Prigozhin found another role for the Wagner Group: recruiting tens of thousands of prisoners on six-month contracts in exchange for full presidential pardons. This move proved to be highly effective in delaying the need for full-scale mobilization, but the degradation of plausible deniability during this period ultimately led to the Wagner Group's demise. Prigozhin's decision to step out of the shadows and leverage social media to build the Wagner "brand" had the benefit of increasing recruitment numbers, but the centralization around a single personality led to increased tensions between Russia's official and unofficial armed formations, especially as their interests began to diverge.

In the aftermath of the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023 and Prigozhin's death two months later, there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the future of the Kremlin's premier

semi-state armed formation. While the mutiny demonstrated the serious risks posed by semi-state military formations, early indications show that the Kremlin is either unwilling or unable to abandon the Wagner model entirely. Despite the obvious hazards of outsourcing military force to ostensibly private actors, the Wagner model remains an attractive option for Russia to bolster its military posture in Ukraine and pursue strategic competition in the Middle East and Africa. In the months following the mutiny, the Kremlin has taken significant steps towards creating a more decentralized version of the Wagner model, supporting a variety of smaller Wagner-like groups that function on a smaller scale and are subject to closer oversight by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU).

While this report focuses primarily on the Wagner Group, it argues that neither the emergence nor the future outlook of the Wagner model can be fully understood without examining a variety of adjacent organizations. Accordingly, a significant part of this analysis is devoted to other private security companies (PSCs), private military companies (PMCs), and so-called “volunteer formations” that are relevant either to the emergence of the Wagner Group or the outlook of the Wagner model after Prigozhin’s mutiny. The report seeks to answer four main sets of questions. First, what were the historical and political conditions that paved the way for Wagner’s emergence in 2014? Second, why and how did the scale of Wagner’s operations expand so rapidly in the span of less than a decade? Third, what went wrong with the Wagner experiment? And fourth, how has the Kremlin learned from its mistakes, and how are semi-state armed organizations likely to feature in Russia’s foreign policy after the Wagner mutiny?

Key Findings

Private Military Companies (PMCs) are prohibited by Russian law,¹ but legal loopholes and selective enforcement of anti-mercenarism laws have enabled the Kremlin to use semi-state armed organizations—which can be thought of as “quasi-PMCs”—to serve state interests for more than a decade.

- Russian law allows certain strategic state-run enterprises to register Private Security Companies (PSCs) domestically,² but PMCs have often been registered in foreign countries to avoid criminal liability.
- While there has been considerable debate in the Duma regarding the need to establish a legal framework to regulate PMCs, it is clear that the Kremlin prefers the current arrangement, which uses selective enforcement of anti-mercenarism laws as a form of control.

The Wagner Group is not the first Russian quasi-PMC, but it revolutionized the way that Russia employs such formations.

- From its inception, the Wagner Group displayed a remarkable degree of flexibility and willingness to adapt to the Kremlin’s changing needs.
- The Wagner Group initially served as a plausibly-deniable tool to manage Russia’s proxy war in eastern Ukraine (the Donbass region), but it quickly became an essential source of revenue and influence in Syria and Africa, as well as a vital source of manpower for the Russian war effort in Ukraine.

The Wagner Group is not private, nor is it a company. It is a unique development that combines elements of traditional PMCs with features of a state-backed paramilitary cartel.

- Despite the widespread use of the label “PMC Wagner,” the Wagner Group is not a formally registered private military company.
- Since its inception, the Wagner Group acted on orders from the Kremlin and relied on financial and material support from the Russian MoD.
- What is referred to as the “Wagner Group” is shorthand for a massive network of shell companies, veterans’ organizations, and business agreements that provide a wide array of services in exchange for money and influence.
- The “Wagner PMC” narrative is part of an intentional effort to conceal a much larger ecosystem of intertwined state and private networks.

¹ See Criminal Code of the Russian Federation [Article 208](#) (“Organization of an illegal armed group or participation in it, as well as participation in an armed conflict or military actions for purposes contrary to the interests of the Russian Federation”) and [Article 359](#) (“Mercenarism”).

² See Law of the Russian Federation "[On private detective and security activities in the Russian Federation](#)" dated 03/11/1992 No. 2487-1, especially Article 3, "[Types of security and detective services](#)"

The role of veterans' organizations and personal networks in the management of Russian quasi-PMCs has often been overlooked in existing research on the Wagner Group.

- After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent restructuring of the Russian military, many veterans of Russia's most elite formations were left without work at a historical moment when private force was in high demand.
- In the late 1990s and early 2000s, former members of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU), and the Federal Security Service (FSB) formed informal personal networks and veterans' organizations that offered opportunities for specialists to work in domestically registered Private Security Companies (PSCs) and foreign-registered PMCs.
- Veterans' organizations continue to function as recruiting networks and clearinghouses that connect Russian contractors to foreign-registered PMCs and PSCs that serve Russian interests.

While the Wagner quasi-PMC model offers a variety of benefits, the Kremlin was unable to manage the risks posed by the principal-agent problem, which ultimately led to Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023.

- The use of the Wagner Group as a surrogate for conventional military force offered a wide array of advantages, including plausible deniability, sanctions evasion, casualty concealment, and financial gain.
- As in any relationship between principal and agent, the Kremlin's decision to delegate authority to a surrogate carried the risk of misaligned interests between the Wagner Group and the Russian conventional military.
- Prigozhin's decision to openly admit his role as leader of the Wagner Group in late 2022 was a vital factor in the unraveling relationship between Wagner and the MoD.

In the months after Prigozhin's mutiny against the Ministry of Defense (MoD), it has become clear that the Kremlin is either unwilling or unable to abandon the Wagner PMC model entirely.

- Liquidating the Wagner empire would be prohibitively costly for the Kremlin for two main reasons: 1) Wagner's network of business relationships in Africa remains a vital source of revenue and influence in a geopolitically contested region; 2) the Wagner "brand" continues to serve as an effective recruitment tool for Russia's war in Ukraine.
- In the aftermath of the Wagner mutiny, two broad recruiting structures have emerged that offer many of the benefits provided by Wagner without the risks of hyper-centralization around a single individual. One of these structures (BARS) operates within Russian law and has a formal link to the MoD, while the other ("PMC Redut") relies on shell-companies and ordinary business contracts, violating Russian anti-mercenary laws.

1.) Introduction

For more than a decade, the Kremlin has relied on semi-state, plausibly-deniable armed groups as an instrument of foreign policy. The Wagner Group, which initially emerged as little more than a battlefield rumor in 2014, quickly became the tool of choice in Russia's military and influence campaigns in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa. While it is typically labeled as a private military company (PMC/ЧБК) in both Western and Russian media, the Wagner Group is not private, nor is it a company. What is referred to as "PMC Wagner" is a new development in the Kremlin's surrogate warfare strategy that is better thought of as a network of shell companies that combines elements of a PMC and a paramilitary cartel. Unlike traditional PMCs, the Wagner Group does not exist on paper as a discrete legal entity. Neither a fully independent organization nor an official state enterprise, the Wagner Group was designed to operate in Russia's gray zone between state and private. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Wagner Group rapidly rose to international prominence, but despite its increasingly public-facing posture, the Wagner Group has never been registered as a PMC,³ and its existence remains formally prohibited by the Russian criminal code, which forbids both "recruitment, training, financing or other material support of a mercenary," and "the participation of a mercenary in an armed conflict or military actions."⁴

At first glance, Russia's employment of ostensibly private contractors who carry out security and combat operations may seem unsurprising. Many countries with well-developed militaries, including the United States, have relied on PMCs to support conventional military operations, most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, virtually all of these countries have chosen to recognize PMCs and PSCs as legal contractors that work in close collaboration with their conventional counterparts and are constrained by the legal frameworks of their state sponsors. Furthermore, Western PMCs and PSCs are almost exclusively used in security and combat-support roles (training, search-and-rescue, intelligence, logistics, etc.), while the Wagner PMC model offers a much wider array of services, including direct-action, assassinations, security for mining operations and energy infrastructure, train-and-equip missions, and even

³ While there is a registration for "PMC Wagner Center" (ОГРН 1227800167242), this legal entity is neither a PMC nor a PSC, but rather a joint-stock company that lists its primary activity as "consulting on business and management issues". See "Пригожин "легализовал" название ЧБК "Вагнер," BBC Русская служба, January 17, 2023.

⁴ See Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, [Article 359: Mercenarism](#).

elaborate disinformation campaigns managed by political technologists.⁵ In both of these regards, the Wagner model represents a major exception to the way modern PMCs have traditionally been employed and regulated.

In the last decade, the Wagner Group has displayed a striking degree of ability and willingness to adapt to the Kremlin's changing needs. Existing analyses and media coverage of Wagner typically produce a stable, one-dimensional picture of the organization, falling victim to the prevailing narrative of Wagner as a deliberate creation of the Kremlin used to wage shadow wars across the globe. However, the actual history of the organization shows a great deal of improvisation and decentralization, suggesting that the Wagner model's success in Ukraine and Syria was critical to justify its expansion to various African countries. The established narrative of Yevgeny Prigozhin as "Putin's chef" who handles Putin's dirty work may hold up in some respects, but it falls short of explaining how an inmate who became a restaurant mogul suddenly managed to organize the recruitment, training, deployment, and support of thousands of armed men across three continents. While this would not have been possible without Putin's full support, that support alone does little to solve the complex logistical and managerial challenges faced by Prigozhin and other Wagner curators.

This analysis of the Wagner Group argues that the group's development has been remarkably dynamic and often improvised. The rapid expansion of the Wagner Group can be roughly separated into three stages. The first stage, which was on display in eastern Ukraine's Donbass region (2014-15), involved the recruitment of professional contractors, most of whom had prior military experience in special forces (Spetsnaz) brigades of Russia's airborne forces (VDV) or Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU).⁶ During this stage, Wagner served as a recruiting mechanism with close ties to the GRU that allowed the Kremlin to use military force under the cover of plausible deniability. These experienced contractors acted not only as force-multipliers for separatist formations in the most crucial battles of 2014 and 2015, but also as death squads to eliminate separatist field commanders who refused to play by the Kremlin's rules.

⁵ Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Nicholas Harrington. "Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies." Center for Strategic and International Studies. September, 2020.

⁶ For an explanation of the designation "Spetsnaz" and its role in the force structure of the Russian military, see Appendix 1.

The second stage began with Wagner's operations in Syria in 2015 and expanded when the group established a foothold in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2017. While the personnel used in these theaters was largely the same type that fought in Ukraine, this phase is distinguished by the discovery of a new business model, which traded military force for lucrative energy and mineral contracts, ultimately shuttling millions of dollars to the Kremlin. Though Wagner contractors occasionally took part in direct-action missions in both Syria and CAR, the group's operations in these countries have primarily—though not exclusively—involved training pro-regime forces, weapons trafficking, (dis)information operations, and security for mining or energy infrastructure. CAR is by no means the only African country that has seen a significant Wagner presence, but it is by far the most successful example, and it serves as a useful case study to show the full range of services offered by the Kremlin's new quasi-PMC model. Using Wagner as an intermediary in CAR allowed Russia to circumvent sanctions and assert influence in its far-abroad, playing great-power politics at a relatively low financial and reputational cost. While plausible deniability began to degrade during this stage, it remained sufficient to justify Wagner's utility to the Kremlin.

The third stage of Wagner's development began with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The cascade of military failures that followed the invasion ultimately led to the most significant turning-point in Wagner's short history. In the initial months following the invasion, Russia's conventional military was faced with a dire manpower shortage, but Putin's reluctance to announce a full-scale mobilization forced him to search for temporary alternatives that could backfill Russian losses. Prigozhin found a solution to this problem in the Russian prison system, resurrecting a mobilization tactic used by the Red Army in World War II.⁷ In the fall of 2023, Prigozhin launched a campaign to recruit tens of thousands of prisoners, offering six-month contracts in exchange for full presidential pardons. While plausible deniability effectively vanished during this period, the Wagner Group's primary benefit to the Kremlin had changed. Rather than providing small numbers of plausibly deniable, highly experienced contractors for special operations or train-and-equip missions, the new prison-recruitment model proved to be a

⁷ “‘Они не оставляли немцев живыми’ В годы войны тысячи советских заключенных воевали на фронте. За что их ценили командиры?” Lenta.RU, May 10, 2022.

highly effective mechanism to address Russia's severe manpower shortage. After Prigozhin lost his ability to recruit from the prison system in early 2023, the Wagner model was once again forced to adapt, relying heavily on a massive social media ecosystem to attract potential recruits. By this point, the "PMC Wagner" brand had accrued enough authority and reach to attract volunteers who saw six-month contracts with Wagner as a preferable alternative to the indefinite contracts offered by the Ministry of Defense (MoD).

In early 2023, as Wagner forces took heavy losses in the battles for Soledar and Bakhmut, the relationship between Wagner and the MoD grew increasingly tense. In the span of a few short months, Prigozhin had used his social media presence to acquire a massive base of popular support,⁸ making himself central to Wagner's ability to function. As Prigozhin's criticism grew more intense, MoD leadership began to perceive him as a threat and took efforts to undermine Wagner's combat effectiveness. What began as public criticism of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov ultimately culminated with Prigozhin's outright rejection of the Kremlin's stated war-aims, which was immediately followed by the so-called "march of justice" that brought columns of Wagner fighters within 150 miles of Moscow and resulted in the deaths of at least ten Russian airmen.⁹

In the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny and his death two months later, the future of the Wagner Group has become increasingly uncertain. While the Wagner Group itself may quietly fade away or be rebranded to death, the Wagner *model* of semi-state PMC usage is poised to remain a central feature of Russia's force-mobilization efforts in Ukraine and great-power ambitions in Africa. Despite the catastrophic failure of the Wagner experiment, the Kremlin appears confident that simply tweaking the model will be enough to preserve most of the benefits provided by the Wagner model, while minimizing the most significant risks. Early indications show that the Kremlin is actively supporting the development of smaller quasi-PMCs and volunteer formations with close ties to the MoD and the GRU.

⁸ "«Левада-центр»: после мятежа почти 30% россиян заявили, что одобряют деятельность Евгения Пригожина. Неделей ранее таких людей было в два раза больше". *Meduza*, June 29, 2023.

⁹ Отдел «Разбор», "От огня вагнеровцев погибли не меньше десяти российских военных. Похоже, многие из них даже не атаковали колонны наемников. Разбираемся в противоречивой информации о жертвах путча," *Meduza*, June 26, 2023.

Methodology

This report draws on a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, including analyses of Russian military doctrine, literature on hybrid, proxy, and surrogate warfare, Russian- and English-language investigative journalism, news reports, social media posts from VKontakte and Telegram, corporate registries, archived web pages, intercepted phone calls, and over twenty hours of publicly-available interviews with contractors who were employed by Russian PSCs, PMCs, and unofficial armed formations.

The driving methodology is a comparative case study, though the cases are delineated by time rather than geography. Case studies are frequently used in analyses of the Wagner Group, but the cases are typically separated by country or region rather than time. The country-by-country approach certainly has its benefits, but using temporal instead of regional boundaries shifts the focus to show how the Wagner model evolved over time and is better suited to building a coherent narrative of the organization's development.

This report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter two explores various theoretical frameworks for analyzing the Wagner Group and ultimately argues that theory on surrogate warfare is best suited for this task. It draws on an array of secondary sources, including monographs focused specifically on Russian military doctrine, as well as broader analyses of surrogate and proxy warfare. Existing reports on the Wagner Group often use literature on PMCs to guide their analyses, but Wagner has little in common with traditional PMCs, despite the organization's own attempts to brand itself as a private organization. Others have attempted to situate Wagner within the context of hybrid warfare, a relatively new analytical category that once appeared promising but has lost much of its descriptive value.¹⁰ This chapter argues that analytical frameworks based in surrogate warfare—especially those that focus on the principal-agent dilemma—are well suited to elucidate the peculiar aspects of the relationship between Wagner and its curators in the Kremlin, which differs in important ways from the typical dynamic that exists between PMCs and their state sponsors.

¹⁰ Майкл Кофман, “Гибридная война, которой нет”. *Vedomosti*, April 20, 2016.

Chapter three examines the emergence of a market for private force in post-Soviet Russia and charts the development of several interconnected PSCs, PMCs, and veterans' organizations operating in the 1990s, 2000s, and early 2010s. It relies heavily on primary sources, including a variety of phone calls, leaked audio recordings, and long-form interviews with three individuals—Igor Salikov, Marat Gabidullin, and Sergei Salivanov—all of whom were members of the Wagner Group and/or other semi-state armed formations. All of these phone calls and interviews have been published by the human rights organization GulaguNet, though they are only available in Russian. The nearly ten hours of publicly-available interviews with Igor Salikov have yet to be incorporated into a large-scale analysis of the Wagner Group, as the first of these interviews appeared in December of 2023 after Salikov fled Russia and agreed to provide testimony to the International Criminal Court. His testimony is especially useful as a starting point for this chapter, as he was employed by a wide variety of PSCs, PMCs, and semi-state armed formations from the mid-1990s until 2022. In addition to these interviews, Salikov published eight lengthy blog posts under the pseudonym Igor Kobal in 2011. These blog posts contain a wealth of information on the various Russian PSCs operating in Iraq in the 2000s, as well as a deep insight into the typical experience of a Russian mercenary in the 1990s and 2000s. The information gathered from the interviews and blog posts is cross-referenced with corporate registries and archived web pages of veterans' organizations and PSCs to show the high degree of interconnectedness between many of the relevant formations operating during this period.

Chapter four focuses on the Wagner Group's debut in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region in 2014-2015. This initial phase of Wagner's development is quite opaque due to the lack of public attention on the organization and the attempts by Prigozhin and his GRU curators to hide the organization from public view. While the quantity and quality of sources that can provide reliable information about Wagner's operations during this period is limited compared to later periods, there is a sufficient amount of evidence to reconstruct Wagner's organizational structure, primary objectives, and relationship with the Russian state. To this end, chapter four relies on a combination of investigative reporting by Bellingcat and The Insider, testimony from Russian fighters, social media posts, and publicly available telephone intercepts provided by Ukraine's intelligence services.

Chapter five turns to the Wagner Group's expansion to the Middle East and Africa that began in 2015. The primary focus of this chapter is showing how Prigozhin managed to make the Wagner model profitable by trading experienced fighters and political technologists for lucrative business contracts. While the Wagner Group established a presence in a variety of Middle Eastern and African countries, this chapter limits its scope to Syria and the Central African Republic, as they serve as the most successful cases from the perspective of the Russian state. Wagner's operations during this period have been covered extensively by a variety of investigative journalists, and the information provided in those sources can be cross-referenced with the testimonies of Salikov and Gabidullin, who were both employed by Wagner shell companies and other relevant semi-state armed formations in Syria and Africa. In 2018, a small number of Wagner fighters created groups on the popular social-networking site VKontakte. While these groups were intended as networking and recruiting platforms, they also provide a wealth of information for investigators and analysts, especially relating to Wagner's Syria operations.

Chapter six begins with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which led to the most significant change in Wagner's recruiting model: Yevgeny Prigozhin's large-scale recruitment of prisoners from the Russian penal colony system. By late 2022, plausible deniability had effectively vanished, which led Prigozhin to publicly admit his role as Wagner's founder and main financier. This period saw a rapid proliferation of Wagner-linked Telegram channels, including Prigozhin's own channel, "Пресс-служба Пиргожина," (Prigozhin's Press Service) which featured daily text, audio, and video messages from Prigozhin and other Wagner field commanders. While there is no shortage of information for this period, separating fact from myth is often difficult, as Prigozhin's own attempts to build the "PMC Wagner" brand were often based on partial truths or complete fabrications. Fortunately, the increased international attention on the Prigozhin and the Wagner Group in 2022 and 2023 created a large demand for information on the organization. By cross-referencing investigative reporting with social media data, this chapter attempts to show how the relationship between the Wagner Group and the Ministry of Defense deteriorated so rapidly and catastrophically.

Finally, chapter seven focuses on the outlook for the Wagner model after the June 2023 mutiny. Like the previous chapter, it relies heavily on Telegram channels linked to a variety of quasi-PMCs and volunteer formations sponsored by the GRU and the MoD, cross-referencing these data with Russian-language investigative journalism and pro-Kremlin media outlets. This chapter not only attempts to chart the growing network of Russia's semi-state military formations, but it also provides a detailed analysis of two particular quasi-PMCs—PMC Convoy and PMC Española—to show how the Kremlin is learning from its mistakes and adjusting the Wagner model accordingly.

2.) How to Think About the Wagner Group

This chapter explores various theoretical frameworks used to think about the Wagner Group, an organization that notoriously defies classification. It begins by pointing out the limitations of the term “hybrid warfare,” which has often been used as the theoretical basis for analyses of the Wagner Group. It then explores the related theoretical lenses of surrogate and proxy warfare and argues that the term “surrogate warfare” is a more useful analytical framework to show the benefits and risks the Wagner model poses to the Kremlin. Unlike hybrid warfare, which emphasizes novelty and strategic innovation, literature on surrogate warfare is able to account for elements of both novelty *and* continuity in the Wagner model. This combination of new and old is explored through a comparison of Soviet surrogate tactics in Syria, Russian *maskirovka* in the annexation of Crimea, and the Wagner Group’s initial operations in Ukraine’s eastern Donbass region. The chapter concludes with a brief note on the role of “curators,” which has become an increasingly important feature of Russia’s surrogate warfare strategy.

Hybrid warfare

One of the most difficult aspects of analyzing the Wagner Group is the problem of how this shadowy and complex organization should be categorized. Though the Wagner quasi-PMC model shares some elements of traditional PMC and mercenary employment, it undeniably represents a new development in the way Russia outsources military force. To fill this theoretical gap, scholars and analysts often reach for the term “hybrid warfare,” which emphasizes the novelty of Russia’s atypical PMC model and situates it within the Kremlin’s broader attempts to leverage low-cost, high-yield options to carry out foreign policy objectives in its near- and far-abroad.

While the term “hybrid warfare” can be a useful analytical category when carefully defined and delineated, it has too often been used as a catch-all term for anything the Kremlin does that Western analysts do not understand. As many analysts have come to recognize, the loose usage of the hybrid warfare label has severely degraded its descriptive value. Rather than being a useful analytical concept, “hybrid” has become a convenient label for any new strategic or tactical development adopted by the Russians. A handful of recent books on Russian military doctrine

admit the limitations of the term, though most continue to use it with minor caveats.¹¹ In *Russia's Military Strategy and Doctrine*, Glen Howard and Matthew Czekaj present what is perhaps the best interrogation of “hybrid warfare” in the Russian context, arguing that the term has severely limited utility as an analytical framework. Rather than starting from Western frameworks of military analysis, Howard and Czekaj start from Russian sources, noting that “hybrid warfare” is a Western term that was only later imported to Russian military thought and has taken on an entirely different meaning in Russian military theory.¹² By reviewing the Russian military literature itself, they attempt to “reversely deconstruct its theoretical fundamentals.”¹³ They argue that the hybrid warfare label has lost its original analytical value and suggest centering the discussion around a term native to Russian military discourse: new generation warfare (NGW). The use of NGW avoids an important limitation of the hybrid warfare term, which is that Russian military discourse tends to use “hybrid warfare” as a category to describe the tactics used by the West *against Russia* that do not meet the threshold of kinetic conflict.¹⁴ In Russian discourse, hybrid warfare is most often used to describe Western support for the various “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space and other popular uprisings in the Middle East and Africa.¹⁵ In the Kremlin’s thinking, the use of plausibly-deniable mercenaries and separatist proxies in Eastern Ukraine was a *response* to what it perceived as Western hybrid warfare in Kyiv. While these perceptions are warped, one must understand them in order to make sense of the Kremlin’s decision-making process.

Proxies, surrogates, and the principal-agent dilemma

Another trend, which seems more promising than the “hybrid warfare” approach, has been to consider the Wagner Group within the category of “surrogate warfare,” which is a theoretical

¹¹ Such publications include Oscar Jonsson. *The Russian Understanding of War* and Betina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*. While Jonsson and Renz acknowledge the term’s limitations, they do not dispense with it entirely. For a brief summary of the problems with the term, see Kofman, Michael. “Миф о ‘Доктрине Герасимова.’” *globalaffairs.ru*, February 5, 2018.

¹² While the term “гибридная война” (hybrid war) does appear in Russian military analysis literature, it is almost exclusively used to refer to *Western* non-military activities (most often Color Revolutions and other activities construed as Western meddling in the post-Soviet space). For a typical example of how the term is used in Russian military discourse, see Александр Бартош, “Мировая гибридная война в стратегии США и НАТО.” *Независимое военное обозрение*, February 24, 2022.

¹³ Glen and Czekaj, *Russia's Military Strategy and Doctrine*, 180.

¹⁴ Valery Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении,” *Военно-промышленный курьер*, February 27, 2013.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Bartosh, “Цветные революции и гибридные войны современности,” *Независимое военное обозрение*, January 22, 2016.

framework better suited to account for both the novel aspects of the Wagner PMC model and the ways in which it represents a revival of decades-old Soviet and centuries-old Russian warfighting practices.

While the terms “surrogate warfare” and “proxy warfare” are sometimes used interchangeably, there are important differences between the two. The use of proxy forces by states with well-developed conventional militaries is nothing new, but the proxy-state relationship has changed significantly in recent decades.¹⁶ In the last fifty years, the use of proxies has become more central to the way states compete with adversaries and pursue their strategic objectives. “Proxy warfare” has typically referred to a relationship between two actors working towards a shared objective in a relationship that is necessarily hierarchical. The proxy relationship involves a stronger “principal”—usually a state—who works with or through an “agent”—often a non-state actor—to pursue strategic objectives. Plausible deniability is often central to these relationships, as the emergence of nuclear-armed great powers has forced states to find options below the threshold of direct intervention in order to manage escalation risks.

Surrogate warfare is a broader category that encompasses many aspects of proxy conflicts. As defined by Krieg and Rickli, surrogate warfare is “the conceptual umbrella for all forms of externalization of the burden of warfare to supplementary as well as substitutionary forces and platforms.”¹⁷ Unlike proxy relationships, which operate on the basis of shared objectives between principal and agent, surrogate relationships are often fundamentally transactional in nature. As a small handful of scholars and analysts have recognized, recent literature on proxy and surrogate warfare can be a useful tool to illuminate the complex relationship between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group.¹⁸ Like all forms of surrogate and proxy warfare, Russia’s use of the Wagner Group suffers from the principal-agent dilemma, which refers to the trade-off between *substitution* and *control* in the relationship between sponsor and surrogate. The basic allure of surrogate warfare is the ability for a state to outsource the burden of warfare by substituting a

¹⁶ Sukhankin, Sergey. “‘Continuing War by Other Means’: The Case of Wagner, Russia’s Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East,” *Jamestown Foundation*, July 13, 2018.

¹⁷ Krieg, Andreas & Jean-Marc Rickli (2018). “Surrogate Warfare: the Art of War in the 21st Century,” *Defence Studies*, 18:2, 113-130.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Karagiannis. “Russian Surrogate Warfare in Ukraine and Syria: Understanding the Utility of Militias and Private Military Companies.” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (July 4, 2021): 549–65.

surrogate for a conventional military alternative. This arrangement offers several obvious advantages for the state, but it comes with a cost: any increase in the degree of substitution necessarily entails delegating more autonomy to the agent, which puts the principal at risk of losing control.

Among the book-length publications on the subject, Krieg and Rickli's *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* stands out as the most coherent and developed analysis of surrogate relationships in modern warfare.¹⁹ Recent attempts to make sense of surrogate and proxy warfare have often relied on twentieth-century or even medieval case-studies, and while these theoretical frameworks have some bearing on twenty-first century proxy warfare, their analyses fall short of adequately explaining the peculiar relationship between Wagner and the Kremlin, which does not fit neatly into any pre-existing model.²⁰ Krieg and Rickli argue that unlike earlier proxy and surrogate relationships, which were in large part driven by “shortages in capacity or the need for plausible deniability,” surrogate war in the twenty-first century is primarily motivated by the state’s need to conduct warfare within the context of “globalized, privatized, securitized, and mediatized war.”²¹

The Kremlin’s use of the Wagner Group is a novel development in many ways, but the extent to which it builds on Cold War foundations has been underemphasized in existing analyses of the Wagner Group. The Wagner model shows significant continuity with the ways that Soviet policymakers employed plausibly-deniable surrogates to pursue great-power competition in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In Syria, the Soviets relied on thousands of military advisors—often referred to as “comrade tourists”—who acted under the cover of plausible deniability to provide military-technical assistance and combat support to Syrian troops.²² In an interview with the pro-Kremlin outlet *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, former “comrade tourist” Valery

¹⁹ See also Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman. “Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World” *New America*, February 2019.

²⁰ Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017; Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*. Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2013; Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy’s Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2014.

²¹ Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli. *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019, 7.

²² Rondeaux, Candace. “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare,” *New America*, November 7, 2019.

Anisimov tells the story of how he ended up in Syria during his military service.²³ One night, while Anisimov was serving as a driver for a Soviet air defense unit, he was suddenly loaded into a bread truck and taken to the Black Sea port of Nikolaev, where he and roughly 1000 other “advisors” were put on a ship alongside several S-200 air defense systems. Only after the ship left port were the advisors given Syrian uniforms and told that they would be “fulfilling their international duty” in Syria. This episode and others like it show a great deal of overlap with the tactics used by the Wagner Group in Ukraine and Syria in 2014-2015, when plausible deniability was still a central priority for Wagner’s curators in the Kremlin. According to GRU veteran and former Wagner fighter Igor Salikov, Wagner forces were given explicit instructions to use Ukrainian weapons as a way to hide Russia’s hand in the conflict and support the illusion that the fighting in eastern Ukraine was nothing more than a civil war.²⁴

Figure 1: Valery Anisimov alongside other insignia-barren “comrade tourists” in Syria²⁵



²³ Aleksandr Voiko, “«Русо туристо» воевали в Сирии и 30 лет назад.” *Комсомольская правда*, October 23, 2015.

²⁴ “Первое интервью экс-офицера российских спецслужб, автора книги “НЕТ ВОЙНЕ!” Игоря Саликова для Гааги.” The interview can be viewed [here](#); the discussion of using Ukrainian weapons as a form of *maskirovka* begins at 1:05:25.

²⁵ [Source](#).

While proxy and surrogate relationships are typically thought of as involving only two actors (principal/agent or sponsor/proxy), these relationships are often far more complex in practice, involving a variety of mediators and facilitators that manage the interaction between principal and agent. This is particularly evident in the context of the Wagner PMC model, which relies on a variety of “curators”—most famously, Yevgeny Prigozhin—to increase plausible deniability and provide an extra degree of distance between the Kremlin and its quasi-PMCs. In this respect, the Wagner model updated the Soviet model of surrogate warfare to meet the new demands of maintaining plausible deniability in the 21st century.

Due to the increased mediatization of the battlespace, simply redressing active-duty service members is no longer a viable solution. As the 2014 annexation of Crimea shows, these cruder forms of plausible deniability still have their place, but they do not offer long-term cover, as investigative reporting, geolocation, and social media data can be used to quickly uncover these more traditional forms of *maskirovka*. Within weeks of the Crimea invasion, it became clear that the so-called “polite people” and “little green men” were in fact insignia-barren Russian paratroopers and naval infantry.²⁶ In the Crimea operation, plausible deniability evaporated within days, but the tactic was sufficient to inject enough doubt into an already chaotic situation, delaying the Western and Ukrainian responses. In the Donbass, however, Russia’s fear of Western sanctions and general reluctance to be pulled into the conflict forced the Kremlin to seek novel solutions that could manage the conflict while also offering robust, long-term plausible deniability.²⁷ Unlike the Soviet advisors in Syria or the “little green men” in Crimea, Wagner contractors in the Donbass were not active-duty servicemen and had no official link to the Kremlin. Furthermore, Yevgeny Prigozhin’s relationship to the Kremlin was the subject of speculation and debate for several years after he was first linked to the Wagner Group in 2016,²⁸ making it unclear exactly to what extent the Kremlin was involved in the management of the Wagner Group. This added degree of distance between principal and agent necessarily limited the former’s control, but it proved to be an effective way for the Kremlin to mediate its shadow war in the Donbass in 2014-2015.

²⁶ Anna Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers and Moscow’s Struggle for Ukraine*. Hurst and Company, London, 2022, 46-47.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 135.

²⁸ Denis Korotkov. “Кухня частной армии.” *fontanka.ru*, June 9, 2016.

Plausible deniability is merely one of many reasons that the Kremlin often chooses to use curators rather than official channels to carry out its foreign policy. In the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny and death, the Kremlin has only increased its use of curators, opting for a plethora of less powerful figures to reduce the threat of a "new Prigozhin." These curators—regional governors, managers of state enterprises, oligarchs, and Duma deputies—continue to be fundamental to the financing and management of Russia's official and unofficial volunteer formations.²⁹ Laurelle and Limonier, who refer to such intermediary actors as "entrepreneurs of influence," resist the tendency to imagine the Russian political regime as a pyramid, where an omniscient Putin sits at the top and makes decisions that are carried out through established administrative channels.³⁰ While this pyramidal structure is more or less present in several key state enterprises, other sectors of Russian power, including its use of the Wagner Group and other quasi-PMCs, are far more decentralized and typically mediated through "entrepreneurs of influence," who represent a plausibly-deniable or cost-effective option for Russia to assert influence around the globe. It appears that many of these entrepreneurs of influence do not act on direct orders, but rather recognize that financing volunteer formations is a viable way to gain power, influence, and the Kremlin's good will. As a country with great-power ambitions that increasingly outpace its economic means, Russia has institutionalized this model in its policy towards Africa and the Middle East, outsourcing responsibility to surrogates that can test the ground in cases where public diplomacy or overt military intervention may not be feasible or desirable.

²⁹ Елизавета Фохт, Сергей Горяшко, Ольга Ившина. "‘Армия на полставки’. Кто управляет российскими нерегулярными формированиями, воюющими в Украине?," *BBC News Русская Служба*, November 20, 2023.

³⁰ Laruelle, Marlene, and Kevin Limonier. "Beyond 'Hybrid Warfare': A Digital Exploration of Russia's Entrepreneurs of Influence." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2021): 318—19.

3.) Private and Semi-Private Force in Post-Soviet Russia

The history of the Wagner Group has typically been told as a story that begins in 2014. As the story goes, it was in that year that Yevgeny Prigozhin—a former convict turned restaurateur with close ties to Putin—founded a covert organization that was designed to carry out sensitive military tasks on behalf of the Kremlin. This basic narrative holds up in some respects, but it often ignores the extent to which Prigozhin and his state sponsors were not building something from scratch, but rather reforming a model of quasi-PMC usage that already existed in Russia. This chapter argues that to fully understand the Wagner Group, it is first necessary to understand the historical conditions that paved the way for the group's formation in the two decades prior to 2014.

There are two facts that warrant this historical digression. First, several of the most experienced contractors that eventually joined Wagner's ranks, including Igor Salikov, did not begin their careers as privateers with the Wagner Group. Salikov and others like him were employed by a variety of PSCs and quasi-PMCs for nearly two decades before Wagner's initial operations in Ukraine. Second, the Wagner Group can trace its genealogy to a variety of organizations operating in Iraq and Syria since the early 2000s. Like the Wagner Group during its early period, these older organizations primarily recruited veterans from a small number of elite Russian military formations and relied heavily on veterans' organizations and personal relationships to build their recruiting networks. Understanding how these organizations recruited and deployed contractors on a questionable legal basis shows how the Wagner Group adopted and refined the operations of similar organizations that preceded it. It also provides context that helps predict how Russia's quasi-PMC model might evolve in the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny.

This chapter begins by describing the unique historical circumstances that enabled the development of a market for private force in Russia. It explores the structural reforms and downsizing of Russia's military and security services after the collapse of the Soviet Union and shows how the combination of three factors—a newly privatized economy, weak enforcement mechanisms, and thousands of unemployed veterans—spawned a massive demand for private force that was often effectively unregulated and often blurred the lines between private security and organized crime. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to tracing the Wagner Group's

genealogy to a variety of PSCs and PMCs operating outside Russia’s borders in the 2000s and early 2010s. This genealogy is built using a variety of primary sources, including interviews, blog posts, archived web pages, and corporate registries. The only organization included in this chapter that is not a predecessor to Wagner is a PSC operating in Syria under the name “Redut” (also referred to as “Shield STG”). While not a direct predecessor to Wagner, Redut operated alongside Prigozhin’s organization in Syria, and it appears poised to take over many of Wagner’s operations in Africa, evidenced by the presence of the organization’s manager, Konstantin Mirzayants, in the Russian MoD delegation that visited several African countries in the weeks following Prigozhin’s death.³¹

The supply and demand of private force in the 1990s and 2000s

The Wagner Group is the first irregular Russian military formation to attract significant international attention, but the market for private force in Russia has existed since the early years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian military’s restructuring efforts in the 1990s left many veterans of Russia’s wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya without work in a historical moment that featured a rapidly expanding private sector paired with weak state institutions and rampant organized crime—a combination that spawned a massive demand for private force.

In addition to the military reforms, the Russian power ministries (силовые министерства) were subjected to structural reforms and significant downsizing in the early 1990s. By 1993, the once-unified KGB was split into five separate intelligence services, which led to a “fragmentation of the state’s force-wielding and surveillance capacity.”³² The poorly defined and often overlapping jurisdictions of these newly formed agencies—which some consider a deliberate attempt to create interagency competition—significantly undermined their overall efficiency and coordination. More important, however, were the personnel changes that accompanied the structural reforms. Between September 1991 and June 1992, over twenty thousand KGB officers found themselves without work.³³ A year later, a significant number of

³¹ Leo Chiu, “Konstantin Mirzayants – What We Know About the Head of Russia’s Redut PMC,” *Kyiv Post*, November 16, 2023.

³² Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002, 130.

³³ *Ibid*, 131.

operatives from the elite anti-terror units Alfa and Vypfel resigned in the aftermath of the October 1993 constitutional crisis.³⁴ The situation in the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) was even more dire: between 1991 and 1996, up to 200,000 employees were leaving the MVD each year.³⁵ Not only did these reforms undermine the effectiveness of the security services, but they coincided with the rapid expansion of organized criminal groups. Without strong state institutions or viable enforcement mechanisms, the privatization efforts of the late 1980s and early 1990s led to an explosion in the number of racketeering and extortion cases, which increased by a factor of fifteen between 1986 and 1996.³⁶

Russia's organized crime problem proved to be a significant obstacle on the path to developing a robust free-market economy. The solution to this problem, however, arose almost accidentally. In 1992, a new law was passed that created a legal framework to regulate the security and enforcement business. The "federal law on private detective and protection activity," which remains the legal basis for PSCs (ЧОП) operating in Russia today, permitted private companies to offer a broad range of protection and security services. As Vadim Volkov argues, the 1992 law was not initially intended to solve the problem of organized crime, but was rather a "tactical solution to provide employment for the former staff of the 'power ministries.'" ³⁷ Between 1993 and 1994, over 4,000 private security agencies were registered, most of which were managed and staffed by former employees of the KGB, MVD, or GRU.³⁸ By the end of the 1990s, private security agencies had absorbed almost fifty thousand former employees of the power ministries.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid, 136. After refusing to storm the Parliament during the October 1993 constitutional crisis, Vypfel was placed under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry (MVD), which led to a mass resignation of employees. Of the 350 employees, only five continued to work in the MVD. Many of the rest went to work for the PSC "Argus," which had been set up by Yuri Levitsky, a former senior commander in Vypfel.

³⁵ Ibid, 132.

³⁶ Ibid, 2. While these numbers show the trend, they likely underestimate the scale of extortion rackets. Volkov estimates that approximately one in four victims of extortion reported the crime to the militia.

³⁷ Ibid, 142.

³⁸ Ibid, 133. Based on an estimate from 1995, roughly half of the heads of private security agencies were former KGB officers, a quarter from the MVD, and the rest from the GRU.

³⁹ Ibid.

Former Wagner fighter Igor Salikov, a veteran of the 15th Separate Spetsnaz Brigade of the Soviet GRU,⁴⁰ explains that many displaced veterans and security service employees felt left behind in the aftermath of the military restructuring efforts, and the rapidly growing private security market proved to be an attractive and viable alternative. As Salikov puts it, “the specialists remained, and they were in demand.”⁴¹ Within Russia’s borders, the legal framework was sufficiently clear, but as Russian enterprises expanded to foreign countries, the situation became increasingly murky. Since Russian domestic law explicitly prohibits recruitment of mercenaries and participation in mercenarism, veterans who hoped to work abroad were faced with a variety of legal hurdles that made it extremely difficult to work as a security contractor outside of Russia without violating Russian law.⁴² In a frenzied 2011 blog post, Salikov vents his frustrations after more than fifteen years of privateering: “the fact is that Russian PMCs, in the form in which these units exist in the rest of the world... do not exist. They do not and cannot exist in nature.”⁴³ To bypass these obstacles, veterans like Salikov relied on personal networks and veterans’ organizations that served as recruiting hubs, offering opportunities to contract with domestically registered PSCs that worked in close collaboration with the Russian MoD. In other cases, the personnel of these companies was entirely Russian or Russian-speaking, but the company itself was registered abroad.⁴⁴

In existing investigations of the Wagner Group, the history of Russian private security and mercenarism in the 1990s and 2000s is rarely taken into consideration, but understanding the intricacies of this period is vital to understanding how Yevgeny Prigozhin and other Wagner managers relied on personal networks, veterans’ organizations, and shell companies to manage the day-to-day operations of an armed formation that supplied military force on a shaky legal basis. Simple questions such as “how did prospective Wagner fighters know where to send their

⁴⁰ During Russia’s military restructuring in the 1990s, the 15th Brigade of the GRU was transferred to Uzbekistan’s Ground Forces and is no longer a part of the Russian military. However, Russia maintains close ties with the 15th Brigade and considers it an allied force. See Mark Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russia’s Special Forces*. Osprey Publishing, 2015, 52-54.

⁴¹ “Свидетельство Игоря Саликова прокурорам о Патрушеве, генерале "Рязань", Вагнере, Редуте, РосАтоме...” The interview can be viewed [here](#); relevant discussion begins at 1:56:30.

⁴² The most explicit and commonly cited prohibition on mercenarism is found in the [Russian Criminal Code, Article 359](#).

⁴³ Salikov’s blog post, written under the pseudonym Igor Kobal, can be viewed [here](#).

⁴⁴ The most notable of these foreign-registered PMCs is Moran Security Group, which was registered in Belize in 2011.

applications?”, “what company was listed on the contract they signed?”, “where did they get their weapons?” and “how did they get paid?” do not make for catchy news headlines, but they are vital to understanding the complex inner workings of the Wagner Group. The short answer to most of these questions is that Wagner functioned much like earlier Russian quasi-PMCs and PSCs, simply on a much larger scale.

Oryol-Antiterror, Redut-Antiterror, and Top Rent Security

Nearly all of the relevant PMCs and PSCs relevant to the Wagner Group story can trace their genealogy to Oryol-Antiterror, a confederation of Spetsnaz veterans from Russia’s airborne forces (VDV) and military intelligence (GRU). Oryol-Antiterror effectively served as a nexus that connected experienced military veterans with domestically-registered PSCs linked to strategic state enterprises run by *siloviki* and Kremlin insiders. As with many of these groups, veterans’ organizations provided the legal basis for Oryol-Antiterror’s recruiting structure. An archived version of Oryol-Antiterror’s website lists both the Oryol Public Organization of Former Servicemen of the Special Forces (founded 1998) and the Oryol Regional Branch of the Interregional Public Organization of Veterans of Airborne Troops and Special Forces (founded 2007).⁴⁵ Descriptions of similar veterans’ organizations are typically generalized statements about assisting veterans in adapting to non-military life, but the description of Oryol-Antiterror’s training center explicitly states that “the main purpose of creating the Center is to assist state and public institutions in solving the problem of ensuring the security of the individual, society and the state,” and that the center’s instructors “provide advisory services on the safety of cargo escort” in North Kurdistan, Baghdad, and Basra.⁴⁶ The website also notes close cooperation with “‘Russian Engineering Company’, ‘Energy Engineering Enterprise’ and the representative office of TATNEFT to ensure the safety of Russian specialists in the restoration of energy, irrigation facilities, and oil platforms.”⁴⁷

In Iraq, Oryol-Antiterror spawned two other detachments: Top Rent Security (sometimes called TigrTop Rent) and Redut-Antiterror (sometimes called “R Group”). Like Oryol-Antiterror, these groups were primarily tasked with providing security for Russian state-run energy extraction

⁴⁵ An archive of Oryol-Antiterror’s website, which lists both veterans’ organizations, can be viewed [here](#).

⁴⁶ Archived page of the Oryol-Antiterror Training Center can be viewed [here](#).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

sites and armed escort for transport convoys. Both groups recruited from a pool of veterans affiliated with the Redut Center for Operational-Tactical Tasks, whose website states that the center was initially composed of veterans from three military units:⁴⁸ the 106th Airborne Division, the 45th Guards Spetsnaz Airborne Brigade of the VDV, and the 2nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade of the GRU.⁴⁹ Redut-Antiterror's website also indicates that the group was affiliated with a Moscow-based organization known as the Association of Veterans of Peacekeeping and Local Conflict Missions, whose corporate registry lists none other than Igor Salikov (the author of the above-mentioned blog post) as one of the organization's co-founders.⁵⁰ Salikov would later contract with the Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, and CAR.

Figure 2. Igor Salikov holding a Redut-Antiterror patch⁵¹



⁴⁸ Archived page that describes the formation of Redut-Antiterror center can be viewed [here](#).

⁴⁹ The 106th Airborne Division is the only highly-represented military formation that is not designated as a Spetsnaz unit, but it should be noted that the 106th continues to have a significant presence in the Russian city of Ryazan, which is collocated with Ryazan Guards Higher Airborne Command School. The Higher Airborne Command School serves as one of the main training grounds for VDV Spetsnaz and GRU Spetsnaz formations, which could explain the group's high representation among Russian mercenaries and PSC contractors.

⁵⁰ Archived corporate registry for Association of Veterans of Peacekeeping and Local Conflict Missions can be viewed [here](#).

⁵¹ [Source](#). True to Redut-Antiterror's VDV Spetsnaz roots, the half-man, half-wolf figure on the patch wears a blue beret and *telnyashka*.

Moran Security Group and The Slavonic Corps

Perhaps the most important figure to emerge from the Oryol/Redut/TopRent network is Vadim Gusev. In the mid-2000s, Gusev was appointed to run Top Rent Security, which was primarily tasked with supplying armed convoys that guarded cargo and energy transports in Iraq.⁵² Several years later, Gusev appeared at the head of a new company known as Moran Security Group, which was in many ways the direct predecessor to the Wagner Group. Like many Russian PMCs during the 1990s and early 2000s, Moran provided security for Russian energy companies, specializing in “maritime security, risk assessment, VIP security, and infrastructure protection.”⁵³ In a 2013 documentary film produced by the state-run channel *Perviy Kanal* titled “Soldiers for Rent” (Солдаты напрокат), Gusev is introduced as the deputy-director of an unnamed PMC that provides maritime security.⁵⁴ As documents on the company’s website clarify, Moran was able to avoid Russian legal restrictions by registering in Belize in 2011.⁵⁵

Figure 3. Moran Security Group archived homepage from January 2012



⁵² In his 2011 [blog post](#), Salikov describes Gusev’s appointment to run Top Rent Security.

⁵³ Ibid, 42.

⁵⁴ The documentary can be viewed [here](#).

⁵⁵ Conformance certificates listing a 2011 Belize registration are still available online and can be viewed [here](#).

In 2013, a contingent of Moran 250 Russian contractors known as the Slavonic Corps was sent to Syria, where they were tasked with protecting oil facilities near Palmyra on behalf of Syria’s Energy Ministry.⁵⁶ Moran served as the recruiting mechanism for the project, but the contracts themselves designated a Hong Kong registration for the Slavonic Corps.⁵⁷ Somehow, the Slavonic Corps fighters ended up in a detachment operating *against* Bashar al-Assad’s army. The contractors were tasked with maintaining control over the city of Dier ez-Zor, a critical oil hub that would make headline news in 2018 when dozens of Wagner fighters were killed by American air power in a firefight with US coalition forces.⁵⁸

After a skirmish that resulted in the deaths of several Russian contractors, the Slavonic Corps returned to Russia, where they were met by FSB officers who seized SIM cards and conducted individual interrogations. While the contractors themselves narrowly escaped criminal prosecution, the group’s two leaders—Moran deputy director Vadim Gusev and staffing specialist Yevgeniy Sidorov—were arrested for violating Russia’s prohibition on mercenarism.⁵⁹ In what became Russia’s first mercenarism case, Sidorov and Gusev were ultimately sentenced to three years in prison, a significantly more lenient punishment than the fifteen years stipulated by the Russian Criminal Code.⁶⁰ Notably, among the Slavonic Corps contractors was Dmitry Utkin, a recently-retired veteran of the GRU’s 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade who would appear in Ukraine roughly a year later using the callsign “Wagner.”

Stroytransgaz “Redut” / “Shield” Stroytransgaz

The final organization that plays a key role in this story is sometimes referred to as Shield Stroytransgaz (STG) and often as simply “Redut,” though it is not the same organization as “Redut-Antiterror” (mentioned above) or “PMC Redut” (see Appendix 2: The Many Reduts).⁶¹ Redut/Shield STG has been active in Syria for more than a decade, primarily working as a security force for the Russian energy company Stroytransgaz, a former Gazprom subsidiary.

⁵⁶ Коротков, Денис. “Последний Бой «Славянского Корпуса»” November 14, 2013.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ермакова, Александра and Гайдар Батырханов. “Завершено расследование первого в России дела о наемниках,” *izvestia.ru*, August 6, 2014.

⁶⁰ “Командиры «Славянского корпуса» в Сирии осуждены за наемничество,” *fontanka.ru*, October 28, 2014.

⁶¹ For a fuller discussion of the many organizations using the name “Redut,” see Appendix 2.

Stroytransgaz is now owned by Volga Group, a private investment firm owned by Russian oligarch Gennadiy Timchenko, who has been a close friend of Putin since the 1990s.⁶²

Redut/Shield STG is managed by Konstantin Mirzayants, who previously served as the deputy commander of the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade of the VDV.⁶³ Mirzayants's deputy, Sergei Salivanov, is a former officer of the 106th Airborne Division of the VDV.⁶⁴ Notably, the 45th Brigade and the 106th Division are two of the three formations listed on the Redut Center for Operational-Tactical Tasks website mentioned above, testifying to the importance of personal relationships and professional networks in the management of Russian quasi-PMCs. In a leaked audio-recording of Salivanov from late 2022, he suggests that Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska also has a role in financing Redut, though it appears that this was a later development that emerged when Redut fighters began to be folded into the VDV's 45th Brigade to support Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁵ Mirzayants's online footprint is minimal, but an archived webpage for the clumsily-named "Interregional Association of Social Protection of Veterans and Employees of Special Forces of Law Enforcement Agencies and Special Services 'Rus'" lists Mirzayants as the organization's vice president.⁶⁶ Like the veterans' associations mentioned above, the website archive for "Rus" indicates that the main function of the group was facilitating the recruitment of veterans for a variety of PSCs linked to state enterprises. In a section titled "Security Companies," the website lists contact information for seven legally registered PSCs with Moscow and Kaliningrad addresses.⁶⁷ Like Gusev and Salikov, it appears that Mirzayants has been involved in the Russian PSC market since the 1990s or early 2000s.

⁶² Денис Коротков. "Без 'Щита': Служба и смерть в еще одной частной военной компании, которой в России официально нет. *Новая газета*, July 28, 2019.

⁶³ Webpage that includes various sources indicating Mirzayants's prior service in the 45th Brigade can be found [here](#). In interviews published by gulagu.net, both Igor Salikov and Marat Gabidullin testify to the fact that Mirzayants (often referred to by his patronymic "Yurievich") manages Redut/Shield STG, and Sergei "Salekh" Salivanov is noted as being second in command.

⁶⁴ Webpage that includes various sources indicating Salivanov's prior service in the 106th Airborne Division can be found [here](#).

⁶⁵ The leaked audio recording, published by gulagu.net, can be accessed [here](#). The relevant comments about Deripaska begin at 48:35.

⁶⁶ The Interregional Association of Social Protection of Veterans and Employees of Special Forces of Law Enforcement Agencies and Special Services "Rus" website, which includes a photograph and short biography for Mirzayants, can be found [here](#).

⁶⁷ The Rus' webpage that lists descriptions and contact information for various PSCs can be found [here](#).

While Redut is not a direct predecessor to Wagner, it is notable for two main reasons. First, membership between the two groups has been quite fluid.⁶⁸ Marat Gabidullin, a former Wagner fighter who has testified against the crimes committed by the organization, explains that after finishing his contract with Wagner in Syria, he joined Redut for several months before being fired for a lack of discipline.⁶⁹ In a leaked phone call, Salivanov confirms this fact, half-joking that Redut hired Gabidullin as a “free agent.”⁷⁰ In an interview with Russian human rights activist Vladimir Osechkin, Gabidullin gives several important insights into Redut that also apply to the way Wagner manages its operations, especially in Syria and Africa. In the interview, Gabidullin repeatedly emphasizes that “everything is provisional” (“всё условно”): the names “Redut” and “Shield STG” could be changed at any moment without significantly impacting the company’s day-to-day operations.⁷¹ In Syria, he claims, the labels functioned primarily as a way to distinguish Redut employees from Wagner fighters.

Figure 4. Former Wagner and Redut contractor Marat Gabidullin in Syria⁷²



⁶⁸ UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, “Written Evidence to Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into Wagner Group.” July 10, 2023.

⁶⁹The relevant Gabidullin interview can be found [here](#), with the discussion of his employment in Redut beginning at 38:15.

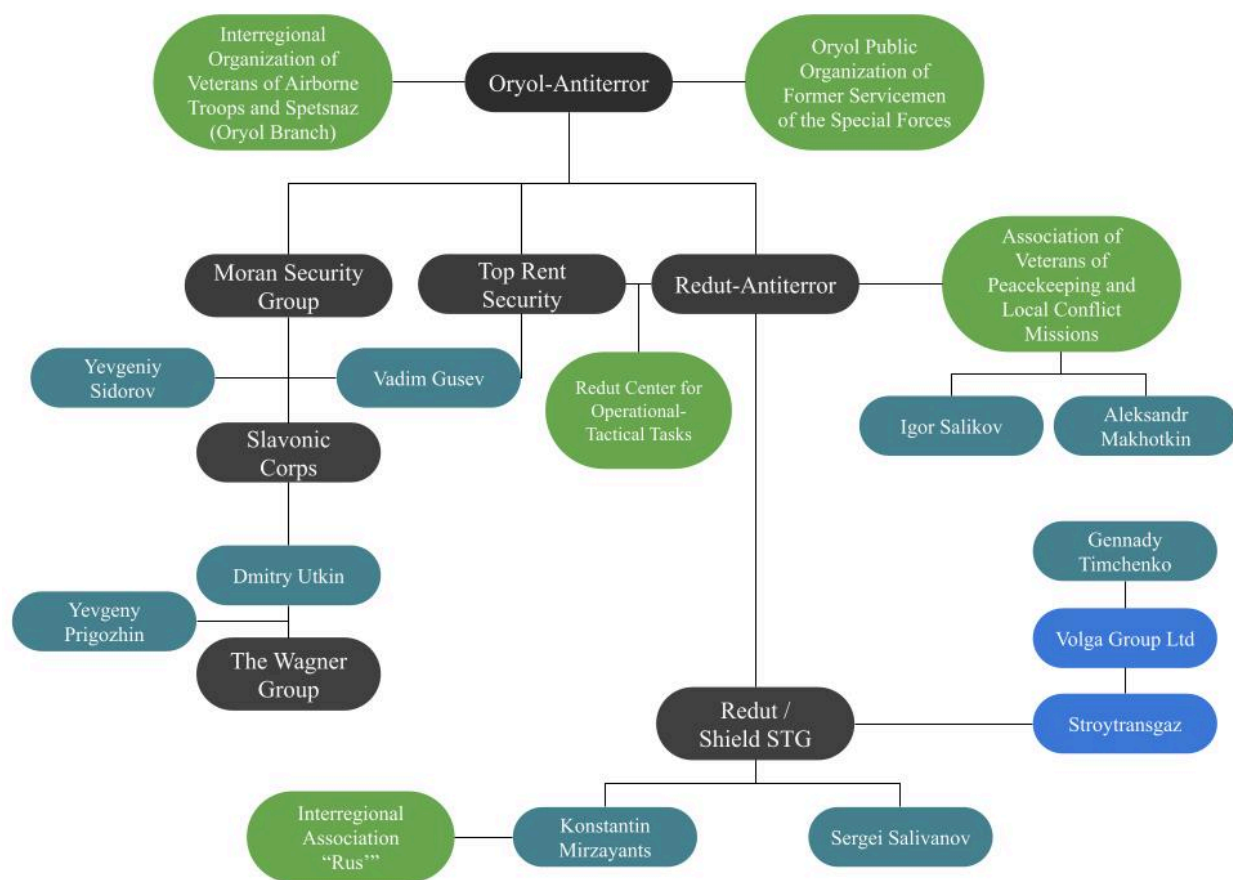
⁷⁰Salivanov repeatedly confirms that Gabidullin worked for Redut in Syria, but he claims that Gabidullin was fired from Wagner as well, contradicting Gabidullin’s own claims that he left Wagner voluntarily. The phone call is available [here](#), with the relevant discussion starting at 24:55.

⁷¹ In [this](#) interview, Gabidullin emphasizes that attempting to find continuity between the various “Reduts” is a futile task. The relevant discussion begins at 31:30.

⁷² [Source](#).

The second important aspect of Redut is that this organization is poised to take over many of Wagner’s operations in Africa. Roughly a week after Prigozhin’s death, a Russian delegation led by Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov visited Libya, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Mali.⁷³ Videos and photos by Russian and African media news outlets show that three main figures appear to be leading the delegation: Deputy Defense Minister Yevkurov, GRU General Andrei Averyanov, and Redut/Sheild STG manager Konstantin Mirzayants.⁷⁴ It seems feasible that Redut could take over the management of security and training operations that were previously a part of the Wagner network, as Mirzayants’s Redut certainly has the requisite experience and hiring networks to manage such operations.

Figure 5. Pre-Wagner PMC/PSC Networks



⁷³“Sécurité : La Fédération de Russie réaffirme son soutien aux autorités de la Transition,” *Burkina24*, August 31, 2023. See also “Глава Мали обсудил с делегацией из РФ вопросы укрепления сотрудничества в области обороны,” *TACC*, September 1, 2023.

⁷⁴ Leo Chiu, “Konstantin Mirzayants – What We Know About the Head of Russia’s Redut PMC,” *Kyiv Post*, November 16, 2023.

4.) Managing the Proxy War: The Wagner Group in Ukraine (2014-15)

The Wagner Group first emerged on the battlefields of Ukraine's eastern Donbass region in 2014. While this period is by far the least understood, it is clear that Wagner's main task during this phase was to function as a plausibly-deniable combat asset managed closely by the GRU.⁷⁵ In Ukraine, Wagner contractors acted not only as force multipliers for pro-Russian separatist proxies in the Donbass, but they also provided the Kremlin with a degree of control over those proxies when separatist leaders' interests began to diverge from the Kremlin's playbook, especially after first Minsk Protocol was signed in September of 2014. This chapter begins by establishing the context for the Wagner Group's entry into Ukraine and argues that Wagner was designed to meet the unique challenges of managing Russia's proxy war in the Donbass. It then examines the available evidence on Wagner's first field commander, Dmitry "Wagner" Utkin. Finally, the chapter describes the two main tasks carried out by the Wagner Group during this period: support for pro-Russian proxy forces in late 2014 and assassinations of certain pro-Russian separatist leaders in early 2015.

The Context: Crimea and Donbass

Discussions of the events that unfolded in Crimea and Donbass in 2014 are too often wrapped in catch-phrases and generalizations that risk obscuring what was in fact a very chaotic and often ambiguous conflict. Unpacking these misconceptions is a vital step towards understanding exactly *why* the Kremlin chose to rely on the Wagner Group during this period. If the Kremlin's goals in Donbass were the same as those in Crimea, why did it initially rely on a small contingent of plausibly-deniable surrogates with no formal link to the Russian military rather than the insignia-barren "little green men" that were used in Crimea?⁷⁶ Rather than understanding the intricacies of each conflict, Western commentary on the events that took place in 2014 often portrays Crimea and Donbass as two parts of one grand strategy, suggesting that Russia's strategic aims were the same in both theaters: invade, conquer, annex.

⁷⁵ Ben Dalton, and Candace Rondeaux. "Rebranding the Russian Way of War: The Wagner Group's Viral Social Media Campaign and What It Means for Ukraine." *New America*, February 16, 2023.

⁷⁶ Artunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, 135.

Anna Arutunyan's *Hybrid Warriors*, which draws on years of reporting from both Crimea and Donbass, reveals that the Kremlin's interference in Ukraine's eastern regions was not driven by a clear plan, but rather by "a kaleidoscope of agencies and actions" that attempted to compensate for Putin's "propensity to avoid decisive action."⁷⁷ The title of the first part of the book, "How a bunch of guys started a war," is far closer to reality than the prevailing narrative of a Russian grand strategy painstakingly managed by Putin at every step of the way. While Arutunyan does not mention the Wagner Group specifically, her analysis of the events that unfolded in 2014-2015 is vital to understanding why the Wagner Group was the perfect fit for the Kremlin's needs in the Donbass.

In 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich—a Donbass native who was elected on a pro-Russian platform—backed out of a proposed economic agreement with the EU, sparking protests in Kyiv's central Maidan square by pro-Western Ukrainians who saw Yanukovich's last-minute change of heart as a betrayal. Yanukovich attempted to suppress these protests by force, a move that backfired and forced him to flee the country on February 22, 2014. Fearing that a pro-Western government in Kyiv could threaten Russia's continued access to its Black Sea ports in Crimea, Putin and other high-ranking Kremlin officials began to consider taking Crimea by force. Four days after Yanukovich fled the country, the plan was put into action, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu gave the order to move a contingent of paratroopers from the 76th Guards Airborne Division to Simferopol, a move that was nominally legal according to the Black Sea Fleet agreement between Russia and Ukraine.⁷⁸ On February 28, these paratroopers were reinforced by an estimated 1,400 Spetsnaz troops, at which point the invasion began in earnest.⁷⁹ The Russian forces that took part in the Crimea operation wore no insignia, did not admit their status as Russian servicemen, and displayed a level of quiet professionalism that earned them the titles of "polite people" (вежливые люди) among locals and "little green men" (зелёные человечки) in Western media coverage. The combination of surprise and plausible deniability—however flimsy it might have been—was enough to delay the Western and Ukrainian response until it was too late.

⁷⁷ Ibid, xii.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 47.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

It was not only Putin who was concerned by the events taking place in Kyiv's Maidan Square and the subsequent ousting of Viktor Yanukovich. A vocal minority of Russian-speaking residents of the Donbass region—who generally favored closer ties with Russia and stood more to gain from an economic agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union than with the EU—saw the events unfolding in Kyiv as a violent mob orchestrating a coup against a democratically-elected president simply because he made an unpopular decision.⁸⁰ This perception was largely the product of Russian propaganda outlets in the eastern regions that planted and fueled this narrative, suggesting that the protests in Kyiv were in reality nothing more than an elaborate Western-backed coup designed to weaken Russia and expand NATO closer to Russia's borders.⁸¹ In early April, pro-Russian separatist leaders in Donetsk demanded that the regional parliament hold a referendum on whether the region of Donetsk Oblast would join the Russian Federation.⁸² A day later, hundreds of separatists stormed the regional administration building in Donetsk, where a group of self-proclaimed deputies announced the formation of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). Soon after, a similar process took place in Lugansk Oblast, where the Lugansk People's Republic was declared on April 27.⁸³ In both regions, the separatists demanded either federalization or integration into Russia, though it was far from clear that Moscow was even willing to have a discussion about annexation of the LNR and DNR in 2014.

While Russia's strategic interests in Crimea were sufficiently vital to justify a bold invasion and annexation, the Kremlin's response in the Donbass was generally cold and remarkably indecisive, as Putin found himself in a situation with no good exit strategy. Fulfilling the separatists' requests to send peacekeeping forces risked drawing Russia into a bloody conflict and provoking further Western sanctions, but abandoning the separatists could spark outrage from the powerful and well-connected nationalist contingent in Russia. Putin's reluctance to become overtly involved in the Donbass meant searching for new options that would allow the Kremlin to manage the conflict in the Donbass under the cover of sustained and durable

⁸⁰ Луна Куц, "Что думают о Майдане жители Донбасса и Крыма", *Русская служба BBC*, January 24, 2014. See also Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, 53.

⁸¹ For a typical example of the Russian "Western-orchestrated coup" narrative, see "Переворот на Украине: что произошло год назад и к чему привела смена власти в Киеве," *TACC*, February 20, 2015.

⁸² Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, 118.

⁸³ "Separatists Declare 'People's Republic' In Ukraine's Luhansk," *Radio Free Europe*, April 28, 2014.

plausible deniability. By late 2014, military communication with the separatist leaders was primarily mediated through Russia's FSB and GRU intelligence services, with the FSB managing the DNR and the GRU managing the LNR.⁸⁴ Vladislav Surkov—a personal advisor to Putin whose official mandate included Ukraine, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia—took on the role of improviser-in-chief, coordinating the politics of the LNR and DNR and acting as a go-between for pro-Russian political leaders and the Russian Presidential Administration.⁸⁵

In the early months following the declaration of the LNR and DNR, intense fighting broke out between separatist militias on one side and a combination of Ukrainian National Guard and ultranationalist volunteer battalions—most notably Pravy Sektor and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists Battalion—on the other.⁸⁶ On both sides, the military situation was chaotic, with no unified command structure and a plethora of diverging interests. In the LNR alone, at least 10 volunteer battalions had sprung up by the summer of 2014.⁸⁷ Loudest among them in the media were Aleksandr Bednov's "Batman" Quick Reaction Group, Alexei Mozgovoi's "Prizrak" Brigade, and Nikolai Kozitsyn's Cossack Guard.⁸⁸ It was not until October 2014 that these self-appointed commanders would meet with LNR leader Igor Plotnitsky and attempt to band together under a unified command structure. Plotnitsky, who had signed the first Minsk Protocols a month earlier, was by this point effectively taking orders from his Russian handlers in the GRU and the Presidential Administration. Realizing that a frozen conflict was the best possible outcome for Russia, the Kremlin attempted to convince DNR and LNR commanders to abide by the Minsk agreements, which involved the establishment of a buffer zone that would effectively mean ceding 600 kilometers of territory back to Ukraine.⁸⁹ It was at this point that the interests of the true believers—the separatist commanders who would settle for nothing less than full realization of the Novorossiia project—began to diverge from the Kremlin's own interests. Starting on the very first day of 2015, the most inconvenient separatist commanders in the Donbass were suspiciously assassinated one after another: first LNR

⁸⁴ "Почему Кремль управляет Донецком и Луганском по отдельности?", *Radio Svoboda Ukrainian Service*, May 20, 2020.

⁸⁵ Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, 157.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 184. See also Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*, Osprey Publishing, 2019, 55-56.

⁸⁷ "И имя им - батальон", *fontanka.ru*, March 30, 2015.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, 194.

commanders Aleksandr “Batman” Bednov and Alexei “Prizrak” Mozgovoi in 2015, then DNR commanders Arsen “Motorola” Pavlov and Mikhail “Givi” Tolstykh in 2016 and 2017.⁹⁰

Dmitry “Wagner” Utkin and the emergence of the Wagner Group in Lugansk Oblast

It was against the chaotic backdrop of mid-2014 that recently-retired GRU officer Dmitri Utkin first appeared on the battlefields of eastern Ukraine at the head of a shadowy armed formation that would come to be known as the Wagner Group. The exact circumstances and timeline of Utkin’s acquaintance with Yevgeny Prigozhin remain the subject of speculation, but Igor Salikov—the long-time mercenary who contracted with Wagner in Ukraine, Syria, and CAR—sheds some light on the unlikely partnership between a Jewish catering mogul and a Nazi-symathizing GRU officer.⁹¹ Salikov first met Utkin in 2010 or 2011, soon after Utkin had left the GRU and began looking for opportunities to work as a mercenary.⁹² Salikov suggests that there were several candidates to lead the formation later known as the Wagner Group, but Utkin’s extensive combat experience and his “extreme brutality” appealed to Prigozhin in particular, who would assist in the funding and management of the group.⁹³ The initial recruitment of Wagner fighters, as Salikov tells it, drew heavily from the now-disbanded Slavonic Corps, as they could be threatened with the same criminal liability that Sidorov and Gusev faced in 2013.⁹⁴

Unlike Prigozhin, whose business arrangements and massive social media presence have been subject of extensive reporting for decades, Dmitri Utkin remained a highly secretive, almost mythical figure until his death in August 2023. There has been a great deal of speculation on Utkin’s path to commanding the Wagner Group, but there are only a few elements of his background that can be firmly established. Most importantly, it is clear that he had a decades-long and reasonably successful career as an officer in the GRU’s 2nd Spetsnaz Brigade.

⁹⁰ Pavlov led the Donetsk-based “Sparta Battalion,” and Tolstykh led the “Somalia Battalion.” While there is ample evidence to suggest Wagner’s involvement in the assassinations of Bednov and Mozgovoi, Pavlov and Tolstykh were likely killed by HUR, Ukraine’s analog to Russia’s GRU. Adam Entous and Michael Schwirtz, “The Spy War: How the C.I.A. Secretly Helps Ukraine Fight Putin,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2024.

⁹¹ Коротков, Денис, “«Хайль Петрович»: История Дмитрия Уткина — человека, который подарил группе «Вагнера» название”, *Dossier Center*, April 10, 2023.

⁹² The interview can be viewed [here](#), with the relevant conversation beginning at 12:15.

⁹³ Ibid, conversation about Utkin’s “extreme brutality” begins at 29:20.

⁹⁴ Ibid, conversation about the decision to recruit from previous Slavonic Corps contractors begins at 31:00.

One of the few existing photographs of Utkin comes from a 1999 newspaper article posted on the Wagner-linked Telegram channel “Grey Zone” in 2022. The caption of the photo indicates that Utkin—a Captain at the time—was serving in Dagestan as the company commander of GRU Spetsnaz unit 94611 (584 ОРСПН ГРУ).

Figure 6. 1999 newspaper article featuring Dmitri Utkin⁹⁵



In a 2002 corporate registry, Utkin is listed as a detachment commander (indicating a promotion since 1999) of military unit 75143, the Pskov-based 700th Separate Spetsnaz Detachment of the GRU’s 2nd Brigade.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ [Source.](#)

⁹⁶ As part of Russia’s military restructuring in the early 2000s, brigades were often registered as separate legal entities. Registration number: 1026002544193. The identity of Military Unit 75143 as a detachment in the 2nd brigade can be found [here](#).

Figure 7. Corporate registry listing Utkin as the commander of military unit 75143

Сведения о лице, имеющем право без доверенности действовать от имени юридического лица		
22	ГРН и дата внесения в ЕГРЮЛ сведений о данном лице	1026002544193 22.12.2002
23	Фамилия Имя Отчество	УТКИН ДМИТРИЙ ВАЛЕРЬЕВИЧ
24	ИНН	262404751144
25	ГРН и дата внесения в ЕГРЮЛ записи, содержащей указанные сведения	1026002544193 22.12.2002
26	Должность	КОМАНДИР ВОЙСКОВОЙ ЧАСТИ 75143
27	ГРН и дата внесения в ЕГРЮЛ записи, содержащей указанные сведения	1026002544193 22.12.2002

Utkin would next appear in the public record more than a decade later, when he was photographed at an award ceremony in December of 2016 alongside three other veterans of the Russian military and President Vladimir Putin.⁹⁷ At the ceremony, Utkin and the three others received Orders of Courage and Hero of Russia medals, raising the question of what these retired military officers did to earn such prestigious military awards in civilian life.

Figure 8: Photo from Kremlin award ceremony featuring Wagner’s initial command structure⁹⁸



Left to right: Andrei “Brodyaga” Bogatov, Andrei “Sedoi” Troshev, Vladimir Putin, Aleksandr “Ratibor” Kuznetsov, and Dmitri “Wagner” Utkin.

⁹⁷ Peter Hobson, “Suspected Russian mercenary leader attended Kremlin reception,” *Reuters*, December 15, 2016.

⁹⁸ Photo source: Муртазин, Ирек, “Задачи ставили генералы: Как была создана ЧВК «Вагнер» и при чем здесь нынешний тульский губернатор Алексей Дюмин.” *Новая Газета*, June 29, 2023.

Soon after leaving the GRU, Utkin joined the Moran Group's Syria experiment known as the Slavonic Corps, returning to Russia in 2013 and narrowly escaping a criminal sentence. By summer of 2014, Utkin arrived in Ukraine, where he would lead a contingent of 150-200 highly experienced veterans that were unofficially referred to as "the cleaners" (чистильщики).⁹⁹

"The Cleaners": Wagner's operations in Lugansk Oblast

Though it is difficult to firmly establish which battles Wagner fighters actually took part in during this period, the Wagner-linked Telegram channel "Reverse Side of the Medal" credits Utkin's formation with the capture of Khryashchevatoye and Novosvetlovka in August of 2014 and suggests that the group played a decisive role in the battle for Lugansk Airport, which was captured by separatist forces in September 2014.¹⁰⁰ Other sources suggest that Wagner may have also been involved in the battles for Donetsk Airport and Debaltsevo, though there is less evidence supporting Wagner's presence in Donetsk.¹⁰¹ According to *Novaya Gazeta*, Wagner's two assault detachments were led by Andrei "Brodyaga" Bogatov and Aleksandr "Ratibor" Kuznetsov, who both reported to Utkin and his deputy, Andrei "Sedoi" Troshev.¹⁰² This command structure fits with the presence of all four men alongside Putin at the Kremlin award ceremony in December 2016. While Bogatov stepped away from Wagner's combat operations after losing an arm while fighting in Syria in 2016,¹⁰³ the other three individuals from the award ceremony remained involved in Wagner's operations until the summer of 2023, when Troshev defected to the MoD and Utkin was killed in a plane crash.¹⁰⁴ Kuznetsov, who commanded the main detachment of fighters that captured Rostov during the mutiny, has quietly faded from public view, giving no comments about the mutiny or the deaths of Prigozhin and Utkin. In early April, 2024, head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov released a video in which

⁹⁹ Денис Коротков, 'Славянский Корпус' Возвращается в Сирию," *fontanka.ru*, October 16, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ <https://t.me/rsotmdivision/10273>

¹⁰¹ Муртазин, "Задачи ставили генералы", June 29, 2023.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ "«Потерял руку, но спас своих бойцов»: подвиг русского офицера, Героя России Андрея Богатова", *dzen.ru*, November 27, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Official Wagner [Telegram channels](#) have tried to downplay Troshev's role in Wagner after the mutiny, suggesting that he is no longer part of Wagner's command structure.

Kuznetsov announced that he would be working as a commander within the Chechen “Akhmat” special forces unit.¹⁰⁵

Figure 9. Likely command structure of the Wagner Group in Ukraine, 2014-15



In 2015, when the Kremlin and its political proxies in the LNR and DNR were growing frustrated with disobedient commanders, the Wagner Group’s curators found a new role for Utkin and his men. While firm evidence linking Wagner to the killings of separatist commanders is lacking, a variety of testimonial and circumstantial evidence suggests that Utkin’s Wagner Group was responsible for at least two of the killings of the LNR’s most outspoken and popular field commanders—Aleksandr Bednov (Batman) and Alexei Mozgovoi (Prizrak)—who by early 2015 were openly feuding with LNR leader Igor Plotnitsky.¹⁰⁶ Both Ukrainian intelligence and former FSB Colonel Igor “Strelkov” Girkin—the self-proclaimed “triggerman” of Russia’s war in the Donbass—have linked Wagner to the assassination of Bednov and Mozgovoi.¹⁰⁷ In a December 2023 interview, Igor Salikov confirmed these suspicions, explaining that near the end of 2014, Wagner fighters were given four days of leave, while commanders traveled to the Russian city of Rostov to meet with Prigozhin and Surkov.¹⁰⁸ According to Salikov, it was during this meeting that Wagner leadership was tasked with eliminating Novorossiia field commanders who opposed Plotnitsky.

¹⁰⁵ https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/4648

¹⁰⁶ Archived Novaya Gazeta article featuring an interview with Mozgovoi can be viewed [here](#).

¹⁰⁷ Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, 209.

¹⁰⁸ Interview can be viewed [here](#), with the relevant discussion beginning at 2:36:00.

Two investigations jointly published by *The Insider* and *Bellingcat* in 2017 and 2018 further illuminate the shadowy command structure at play in the LNR during this period, adding to the evidence that Utkin’s formation was directly integrated into the GRU’s chain of command. While Surkov was the main mediator between the Kremlin and the separatist governments in the LNR and DNR, the GRU was the main organ tasked with handling the LNR’s military operations. Intercepted phone calls indicate that two individuals—operating under the codenames “Delfin” and “Orion”—were the primary Russian military officers giving orders in the LNR.¹⁰⁹ “Delfin,” who has been identified as General Nikolai Tkachyov, was located in Moscow and issued orders to a GRU officer in Lugansk, Oleg “Orion” Ivannikov.¹¹⁰ As *The Insider* managed to establish, Ivannikov previously worked under diplomatic cover using the alias Andrei Ivanovich Laptev in South Ossetia. In the breakaway region, Ivannikov served as the Minister of Defense from 2006 to 2008, a role that would have perfectly prepared him for his eventual position as the unofficial curator of the LNR’s military affairs.¹¹¹

An article published by the pro-Kremlin outlet *Ridus* in 2018 features an interview with Evstafy Botvinyev, a Russian citizen who joined a group of military specialists that arrived in Lugansk Oblast in May of 2014.¹¹² Botvinyev describes Utkin’s group as a small contingent (roughly 100 men) of highly experienced and well-equipped fighters that took part in the storming of Lugansk Airport. Crucially, Botvinyev claims that his own formation, Utkin’s formation, and Plotnitskiy himself all reported to the same person, whom he identifies as Andrei Ivanovich—the same name and patronymic that Ivannikov used while under official cover in South Ossetia.

“In Lugansk, there was a certain Andrei Ivanovich, to whom Dima [Utkin] was subordinated, to whom we were subordinated, to whom Mr. Plotnitsky was subordinated. And I know who Andrey Ivanovich is. And I know that he is connected with these structures.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ “Охота на «Дельфина». Ключевой фигурант дела о сбитом «Боинге» МН17 оказался российским генерал-полковником”, *The Insider*, December 8, 2017.

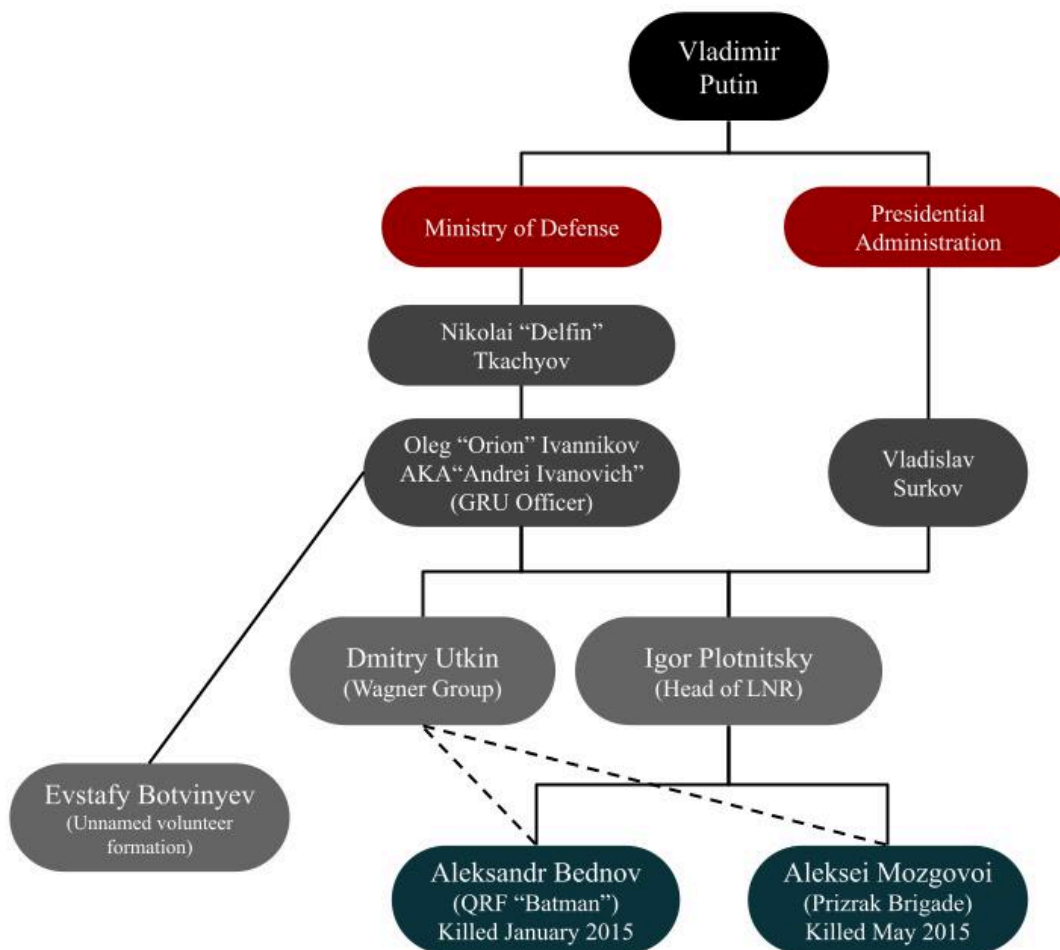
¹¹⁰ “Его выдал женский голос. Оpoznан генерал ГРУ, ключевой фигурант дела о сбитом «Боинге» МН17”, *The Insider*, May 25, 2018.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Долгарева, Анна, “«У нас за это сажают»: интервью с бывшим соратником Дмитрия Вагнера” *gidus.ru*, May 15, 2018.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Figure 10. Likely chain of command in the LNR (2014-2015)



The chain of command that emerges from this collection of sources suggests that Utkin's Wagner Group took direct orders from an acting GRU officer stationed in Lugansk, who in turn reported to a high-ranking Moscow-based General and was almost certainly in contact with Surkov, a personal aide to Putin. The evidence from a variety of sources on both sides of the conflict indicate with a high degree of probability that Wagner's main task in 2014 was assisting separatist forces in direct-action missions, and in 2015 the priority shifted to eliminating separatist field commanders who were defying orders from the Kremlin's political proxies in the LNR. This second aspect of Wagner's early Ukraine operations has been severely underreported, but it is vital for understanding how Wagner functioned not only as one of the Kremlin's many surrogates in the region, but also as a *mediator* between the Kremlin and its separatist proxies in

the Donbass. In this case, Wagner was performing duties that would traditionally fall under the purview of Russia's military intelligence (GRU), which explains the high representation of former GRU officers among Wagner's field commanders. Using Wagner as a surrogate for the GRU proved to be an effective way to increase the degree of plausible deniability in a geopolitically fraught moment.

Sidebar: The extent of cooperation between Wagner and the MoD

After nearly a decade of denying¹¹⁴ any link between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group's operations in Ukraine, Syria, and Africa, Vladimir Putin stated on June 27, 2023 that "the maintenance of the entire Wagner Group was fully provided by the [Russian] state" through the Ministry of Defense and the state budget.¹¹⁵ According to Putin, from May 2022 to May 2023, 86 billion rubles (~860 million USD) and another 110 billion rubles (~1.1 billion USD) for insurance payments were allocated from the state budget to fund the Wagner Group.¹¹⁶ While this admission came after the group's plausible deniability had already been significantly degraded by Wagner's social media presence, it is notable that Putin only admitted a link between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group since mid-2022. However, the Kremlin's sponsorship of the Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, and various African countries since 2014 is well documented by documentary, photographic, and interview-based evidence.¹¹⁷

Before it was closed in July of 2023,¹¹⁸ the main Wagner Group training base was co-located with the GRU's 10th Spetsnaz Brigade near the garrison town of Molkino.¹¹⁹ In addition to the shared base, Wagner contractors have relied on Russian military equipment and transport since the very beginning of their operations in Ukraine. In late 2014 and early 2015, Wagner fighters were armed only with weapons that would have been available to Ukrainian separatists, but after

¹¹⁴ "Они там действительно присутствуют": Путин о ЧВК в Сирии" *ВВС Русская служба*, June 20, 2019.

¹¹⁵ Данил Сотников, "Путин признал спонсирование ЧВК "Вагнер" государством", *DW*, June 27, 2023.

¹¹⁶ "Путин заявил, что содержание всей группы "Вагнер" полностью обеспечивалось государством", *TASS*, June 27, 2023.

¹¹⁷ Kimberly Marten. "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 189. See also Денис Коротков, "Славянский Корпус" Возвращается в Сирию," *fontanka.ru*, October 16, 2015.

¹¹⁸ https://t.me/razgruzka_vagnera/235

¹¹⁹ "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State." *Center for Security and International Studies*. September 21, 2020. The two bases share a main gate on the main rural highway outside of Molkino. In November 2022, the state-funded RT documentary "Contract with the Motherland" (Контракт с Родиной) featured footage of a newly constructed Orthodox chapel on Wagner's Molkino base.

Russia's interference in the Donbass became more overt, Wagner acquired more advanced Russian equipment.¹²⁰ Open-source photo and video evidence has shown Wagner fighters equipped with armored vehicles and artillery, as well as transport aircraft that have shuttled contractors to and from Libya and Syria.¹²¹ In the group's combat activities, various sources have identified Wagner fighters equipped with advanced small arms and heavy mechanized equipment that would be virtually impossible to obtain without the help of the MoD.¹²² According to a report by the Ukrainian military intelligence service (HUR), verified by Bellingcat, Wagner contractors' passports are provided by Central Migration Office Unit 770-001, which issues passports to MoD assets.¹²³ In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, collaboration between the MoD and the Wagner Group became so blatant that any residue of plausible deniability quickly evaporated.

While the existence of long-standing ties between Wagner and the MoD is beyond question, the intricacies of the relationship between Wagner and its state-sponsor are not as straightforward as they may seem. The extent to which the MoD was involved in Wagner's command and control at the tactical level remains unclear, though the level of cooperation seems to vary across different contexts. Despite Wagner's reliance on material support from the MoD, it appears that in Africa, Wagner managers have until recently enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. Despite the obvious risk that delegating autonomy to a surrogate entails, this hands-off model has two significant advantages: increasing plausible deniability and reducing management burdens for the MoD and GRU. The Kremlin undoubtedly gives general strategic guidance, but Prigozhin and his various local managers seemed to maintain broad operational freedom to decide *how* they met certain prescribed objectives.

¹²⁰ Interview can be viewed [here](#), with the relevant conversation starting at 1:05:25.

¹²¹ "Band of Brothers" CSIS. September 21, 2020.

¹²² Sergey Sukhankin, "Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East." *Jamestown*, July 13, 2018. This equipment includes T-72 main battle tanks, BM-21 Grad Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), and D-30 122-millimeter howitzers.

¹²³ "Wagner Mercenaries with GRU-Issued Passports: Validating SBU's Allegation." *Bellingcat*, July 16, 2020.

5.) Discovering a New Business Model: Wagner in Syria and CAR (2015-2023)

While the Wagner Group was a highly effective, plausibly-deniable tool for the Kremlin in the Donbass, it was not profitable. The costs to support a contingent of a few-hundred fighters in this theater were likely quite low, but expanding the organization's operations to other theaters presented opportunities to make the Wagner model financially self-sustaining and eventually even profitable. Two factors likely explain this development. First, Prigozhin's own motives were primarily profit-driven. By 2014, he had more than ten years of experience in business and government contracting, giving him the requisite skills and connections to establish corporate fronts operating alongside or on behalf of the Russian MoD. Second, as demonstrated above, the command structure of the Wagner Group was made up almost entirely by experienced veterans of the GRU, which has historically aspired to make operations self-financing wherever possible.¹²⁴ This chapter explores the Wagner Group's transformation between 2015 and 2018, focusing primarily on the development of a new business model in Syria and the expansion of that model to the Central African Republic, mapping the key corporate entities that Prigozhin and his regional managers used to trade military force for political influence and monetary gain. It shows how the Wagner Group—under the guidance of the Russian state—tended to target weak regimes led by leaders who are willing to make significant financial concessions to secure their hold on power.

Wagner arrives in Syria

In the spring of 2011, as popular unrest swept across the Arab world in a cascade of protests that came to be known as the Arab Spring, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's violent crackdown on protesters led to the development of a multi-factional insurgency that quickly escalated to full-scale civil war. In the eyes of many Kremlin insiders—especially the *siloviki* that dominate Putin's inner circle—these protests were nothing more than Western-backed plots to destabilize countries in Russia's sphere of influence. By this point, Putin had spent roughly a decade

¹²⁴ Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24", RUSI Special Report, February 2024.

developing relationships with the Assad regime, often in the form of energy and arms deals that were vital revenue streams for the Kremlin.¹²⁵

In late 2014 and early 2015, the Kremlin began to explore options that could tip the balance of the conflict in favor of the Assad regime. It was around this time that Russian advisors in the region spearheaded the formation of the Fourth Assault Corps, which was formally established in October 2015, less than a month after Russia initiated its air campaign in Syria.¹²⁶ The Fourth Assault Corps was in essence the first attempt at large-scale Russian-Iranian coordination in the region, which ultimately proved to be a failure due to infighting between competing Iranian- and Russian-backed militias.¹²⁷ In November 2016, after months of failed attempts to recapture strategic territory, Russian advisors pushed to establish a new force—the Fifth Assault Corps—that would be entirely “subsidized, trained, and advised” by a mix of Russian regulars and contractors.¹²⁸

The narrative presented by Wagner-linked Telegram channels largely fits with these broader developments in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) force structure. According to the timeline presented by Wagner-linked Telegram channel Reverse Side of the Medal,¹²⁹ Wagner forces first arrived in Syria in the summer of 2015 and were initially involved in fighting close to the Turkish border, likely as a contingent of the Fourth Assault Corps.¹³⁰ In March 2016, the post claims, Wagner’s First Assault Detachment (1-й ИИО) successfully stormed Palmyra under the leadership of Aleksandr “Ratibor” Kuznetsov. While the post diminishes the role of other Syrian forces that took part in the March 2016 offensive, it is likely that Wagner forces did in fact play a pivotal role in taking Palmyra, which remains a vital hub for oil, gas, and mineral extraction.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Rondeaux, “Forward Operations: From Deir Ezzor to Donbas and Back Again” in *Decoding the Wagner Group*.

¹²⁶ Abdullah al-Jabbassini, “From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria,” *European University Institute*, May 14, 2019, 5.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Gregory Waters, “Rebuilding,” in *The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army’s Destruction and Rebirth*, *Middle East Institute*, July 18, 2019.

¹²⁹ Reverse Side of the Medal was co-founded and managed by Maxim Yuryevich Fomin (better known as Vladlen Tatarsky), a prominent Russian military blogger who was assassinated in April 2023.

¹³⁰ <https://t.me/rsotmdivision/10273>

¹³¹ Rondeaux, “Forward Operations: From Deir Ezzor to Donbas and Back Again” in *Decoding the Wagner Group*.

After ISIS fighters recaptured Palmyra in late 2016, Wagner forces took part in the second offensive, ultimately retaking the city in March 2017. Taking Palmyra not only restored access to the critical oil and gas fields located north of the city, but it also paved the way for a Syrian offensive in Dier ez-Zour, a city that would make international headlines in February 2018, when Wagner fighters launched an assault on a Conoco-Philips plant held by Syrian Democratic Forces and US special operations forces.¹³² After the assault began, US coalition forces used the ground deconfliction line to contact the Russian MoD leadership in Khmeimim, who denied any connection to the operation, prompting US forces to deliver a series of airstrikes that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Russian and Syrian forces and raised questions about the extent of collaboration between the MoD and Wagner operators.

The General Petroleum Corporation and Evro Polis

Access to energy resources has long been central to the Assad regime's survival. Oil and gas revenues from the state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company (SPC) accounted for roughly 25 percent of all government revenues prior to 2011.¹³³ As access to these revenues was threatened by the civil war unfolding in Syria, the Assad regime was willing to offer significant financial incentives to anyone who could retake energy installations controlled by ISIS and other anti-Assad forces.

It was against this backdrop of desperation that the Wagner Group discovered a new business model: offering capable military force in exchange for a share of energy revenues. The critical front-company for Wagner's operations during this period was Evro Polis, an LLC registered in the Russian city of Krasnoyarsk in 2016. In January 2017, Evro Polis was acquired by Neva, a joint-stock company headed by Wagner's logistics manager, Valeriy Chekalov.¹³⁴ While links between Chekalov and Prigozhin have long been the subject of speculation, any doubt of collaboration between the two vanished when Chekalov was killed alongside Prigozhin and Utkin in the August 2023 plane crash.¹³⁵ Evro Polis reportedly acted as the legal front for Wagner

¹³² Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018.

¹³³ "Syrian Petroleum Company," *MEED Middle East Business Intelligence*, November 10, 2013.

¹³⁴ Андрей Мирный, "ЧВК «Вагнер»: бизнес на крови", *Совершенно Секретно*, March 21, 2023. Corporate registration that shows Chekalov as head of Neva and Evro Polis as a subsidiary can be accessed [here](#).

¹³⁵ "В списке пассажиров самолета Пригожина — два его ближайших соратника и бойцы ЧВК «Вагнер»" *Dossier Center*, August 24, 2023.

contractors in Syria, who signed contracts with the company as surveyors, mechanics, and topographers.¹³⁶ A contract between Evro Polis and the state-owned General Petroleum Corporation stipulates that for every oil and gas field recaptured by the Evro Polis, the company would receive 25% of future extraction profits.¹³⁷

Figure 11. Excerpts from the contract between Evro Polis and General Petroleum Corporation¹³⁸

Принимая во внимание, что Подрядчик желает взять на себя обязанность освободить территории месторождений нефти и газа, а также иных территорий в границах Сирийской Арабской Республики, определенных в Приложениях А и Б данного Контракта, а затем разрабатывать месторождения нефти и/или газа, осуществлять добычу полезных ископаемых, их переработку, транспортировку, хранение и реализацию совместно с Компанией,

21.4.3. Произведенный газ в районе и измеренный на узле коммерческого учета, подготавливается к продаже, путем его упаковки в баррели, соответствующие нефти (BNM) согласно условиям пункта 8.4.2 и делится согласно следующим процентам:

21.4.3.1.25% Подрядчику

21.4.3.2.75% Компании.

The contract between Evro Polis and General Petroleum is an important development in the Wagner quasi-PMC model, as it proved to be a highly profitable scheme that traded military force for energy revenues. This model would be exported and refined in a variety of African countries, where the Wagner Group supplied fragile regimes with military equipment, training, and protection in exchange for lucrative mining and energy contracts.

Wagner in the Central African Republic

In many ways, the Wagner Group's operations in Syria bridge the gap between the organization's Ukraine and Africa phases. In Syria, Wagner contractors primarily functioned as force multipliers folded into various pro-Assad military units and militias, offering the Kremlin an element of control over its proxies in an arrangement similar to the model on display in Ukraine (2014-2015). Unlike in Ukraine, however, Prigozhin began to maneuver to make the Wagner Group profitable in Syria, securing energy contracts that could be used to further fund Wagner's

¹³⁶ Мирный, "ЧВК «Вагнер»: визнес на крови".

¹³⁷ Коротков, Денис, "Немного бизнеса в сирийской войне." *fontanka.ru*, June 26, 2017. Full contract as published by the Associated Press can be accessed [here](#).

¹³⁸ [Source](#).

operations and shuttle money back to the Kremlin. It was this latter aspect of Wagner’s success in Syria that paved the way for the group’s involvement in Africa.

While Wagner has established a foothold in several African countries, the Central African Republic (CAR) remains the best example of the model that has been applied on the African continent. CAR has been subject to a UN arms embargo since 2013, when widespread violence broke out between the country’s Christian and Muslim factions.¹³⁹ In December 2017, the Russian government was granted an exception to the embargo with the purpose of building up the military capabilities of the CAR government, led by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. A UN Security Council report indicates that Russia deployed 175 military instructors to the region in December of 2017.¹⁴⁰ Notably, only five of these individuals were members of the Russian military, while the remaining 170 were identified as “contractors,” likely employed by one of the many Prigozhin-linked shell-companies.¹⁴¹ While Wagner contractors made a quiet and limited entry into CAR, their footprint rapidly expanded in the years that followed.¹⁴² An estimate from 2021 put the number of Russian contractors in the country at 2,300, spread across 30 different bases.¹⁴³

Unlike in Ukraine or Syria, the Wagner Group’s activities in CAR have only occasionally extended to actual combat operations. Instead, Wagner contractors provide regime protection, facilitate weapons deliveries, train pro-regime military forces, and provide security for mining operations. While both Prigozhin and the Kremlin stood to benefit financially from these business arrangements, the broader goal of Wagner’s involvement in Africa has been securing a geopolitical foothold and ensuring Russia’s role as a key player in a strategically contested region. Unlike in Ukraine or Syria, where the Kremlin has used Wagner to “bend someone’s will in order to achieve a specific outcome,” the PMC model in Africa serves the broader goal of

¹³⁹ Carl Shreck, “What Are Russian Military Contractors Doing In The Central African Republic?” *Radio Free Europe*, August 2, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ The UN Security Council report can be accessed [here](#). The 175 instructors are mentioned on page 30.

¹⁴¹ While the UN report does not specify beyond the designation “military” for the five instructors, *Novaya Gazeta* reports that the five military instructors were GRU officers, which fits with previous Wagner operations and the GRU’s general purview. See Юрий Сафронов and Ирек Мургазин, “Нам нужен свой ЦАП?”, *Novaya Gazeta*, August 2, 2018.

¹⁴² Степан Костецки. “Алмазы, золото и кровь. Почему Россию обвиняют в зверствах наемников из ЧВК в центральной Африке?” *Lenta.ru*, July 3, 2021.

¹⁴³ Tim Lister, Sebastian Shukla, and Clarissa Ward. “‘It Was Our Children They Killed.’” *CNN*, June 15, 2021.

acquiring political influence and establishing sanction-proof revenue streams in Russia’s far-abroad at a comparatively low financial and reputational cost to the Kremlin.¹⁴⁴

In CAR, Wagner has offered the Touadera regime a wide array of goods and services, supplying weapons, regime protection, and training in exchange for mineral extraction rights granted to Prigozhin-linked companies. Among these companies, three were designated as sanctions targets by the European Union in February 2023: Diamville, Lobaye Invest, and Sewa Security Services.¹⁴⁵ All three companies—locally registered in CAR—are subsidiaries of M Finans, an LLC registered in St. Petersburg to Evgeny Khodotov, a known associate of Prigozhin.¹⁴⁶ Diamville and Lobaye Invest appear to handle the bulk of Wagner’s mining operations in the country, while Sewa Security Services provides protection to government officials and assists with security operations and training pro-regime forces. Since 2021, the recruitment of Wagner contractors for deployment to CAR has been facilitated by a veterans’ organization known as the Commonwealth of Officers for International Security. The corporate registry indicates that the organization’s general manager is Aleksandr Ivanov, who stated in June 2021 that his organization employed 1,135 “instructors” working in CAR.¹⁴⁷

New business ventures

In addition to the military-technical agreements between the Touadera government and Wagner shell-companies, CAR has become a testing ground for a variety of other business ventures, including radio stations, news outlets, cultural centers, and even coffee and beer breweries. Though often small in scale, Wagner’s non-military projects in the region have been highly effective in improving the public perception of Russia in CAR, which is critical to continued Russian influence in the region.¹⁴⁸ The main manager for Wagner’s non-military operations in the

¹⁴⁴ Gilje and Bukkvoll, “Private Military Companies,” 140.

¹⁴⁵ “Treasury Increases Pressure on Russian Financier,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 23, 2020. See also: Nathaniel Reynolds, “Putin’s Not-so-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 8, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Александр Атасунцев and Евгений Пудовкин, “Экс-глава связанной с Пригожиным фирмы получил алмазный контракт в ЦАР”, *rbc.ru*, April 23, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ “Александр Иванов: армию ЦАР инструктируют более 1100 военспецов из России”, *RIA Novosti*, June 10, 2021. The registration number for Commonwealth of Officers for International Security (Содружество офицеров за международную безопасность) is 1217700038710.

¹⁴⁸ Andrei Zakharov, Katya Arenina, Ekaterina Reznikova, and Mikhail Rubin, “Chef and Chief. Portrait of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the personal sadist of the Russian president”, *Proekt Media*, July 12, 2023.

region is Dmitrii Sytyi, a 34 year old Russian citizen who graduated from a Paris business school, where he studied marketing and business.¹⁴⁹ Documents obtained by the Dossier Center also reveal that before traveling to CAR, Sytyi was employed by Prigozhin’s “troll farm,” the Internet Research Agency.¹⁵⁰

Figure 12. Dmitrii Sytyi’s resumé, obtained by Dossier Center¹⁵¹

DMITRII SYTYI
Business Development
International Marketing

Address
47 Blvd Victor Hugo
92200
Neuilly sur Seine

Contact
dmitrii.sytyi@skema.edu
+33 674 387 231
linkedin.com/in/sytyi

ABOUT ME

Graduate in Business Development and Marketing. Extremely interested in working in an international company in high-tech domain that will challenge my skills and competences with exciting tasks. I have substantial international experience (lived, worked and studied in Russia, Spain and France). Fluent in 4 languages while having meticulous and creative personality.

D.O.B.: 23 March 1989

EDUCATION

Skema Business School
Paris, 2014 — 2015
MSc in International Marketing & Business Development
Market Research Sales Big data Financial analysis

Universitat Int. de Catalunya
Barcelona, 2011 — 2012
MA in Cultural Management
Event Management Intercultural Communication

State University of Economics & Finance
St.Petersburg, 2006 — 2011
Specialist (Bachelor +1y) in International Trade
International Trade Commerce Economics

WORK EXPERIENCE

UIC
Barcelone, 2011 — 2012
Intern, Event Manager
Exhibition Organization Funding Allocation

Trans Logistic Consult
St.Petersburg, 2010 — 2011
Customs Clearance Manager (Brokerage)
Customs Intermediary Declaration Processing Import/Export Procedures

LANGUAGES

English [Bilingual]
French [Prof. proficiency]
Spanish [Prof. proficiency]
Russian [Native]

PERSONAL SKILLS

Teamwork Problem solving
Communication Analytical skills
Adaptability Creativity

DIGITAL SKILLS

MS Office Suite Data Visualisation
SPSS Statistics Adobe Photoshop
Social Media Adobe Illustrator

Sytyi has been linked to a variety of Wagner Group companies, including Lobaye Invest, Diamville, and Radio Centrafricaine Lengo Songo. As mentioned above, the former two companies are fronts for Wagner mining operations in CAR, but Radio Lengo Songo represents Wagner’s first foray into the information space in the country. Lengo Songo, a French-language media outlet financed by Lobaye Invest, conducts disinformation campaigns and works to build a positive image of Russia’s presence in the country.¹⁵² The outlet’s website frequently features

¹⁴⁹ Benoit Faucon and Gabriele Steinhauser, “The Elusive Figure Running Wagner’s Embattled Empire of Gold and Diamonds”, *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 2023.

¹⁵⁰ “Dimitri Sytyi, cadre de Wagner en Centrafrique”, *All Eyes on Wagner*, December 20, 2022.

¹⁵¹ [Source](#).

¹⁵² “Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization”, *treasury.gov*, January 26, 2023.

articles that mention the Wagner Group and the Commonwealth of Officers for International Security by name, emphasizing the benefits of continued cooperation between Moscow and Bangui.¹⁵³

Figure 13. Lengo Songo billboard in Bangui, CAR indicating Lobaye Invest sponsorship¹⁵⁴



In an August 2023 interview for the pro-Kremlin outlet *pravda.ru*, Sytyi admitted his long-standing connection to Prigozhin and the Wagner Group, explaining that he first arrived in CAR in 2018 as a translator for Valeriy Zakharov, one of the original 175 “instructors” who would eventually serve as President Touadéra’s National Security Advisor.¹⁵⁵ After roughly a year of working as a translator, Sytyi was registered as a shareholder of Lobaye Invest, Wagner’s first shell company in CAR that received permission to conduct gold and diamond mining operations.¹⁵⁶ In May 2019, Sytyi appeared next to President Touadera at the International Economic Forum in St Petersburg, ostensibly as the CAR president’s personal translator.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Two examples of articles mentioning Wagner and the relevant veterans’ organization can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

¹⁵⁴ [Source](#).

¹⁵⁵ Дарья Асламова, “Как с помощью теракта французы хотели выгнать “Вагнера” из ЦАР”, *pravda.ru*, September 8, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Benoit Faucon and Gabriele Steinhauser, “The Elusive Figure Running Wagner’s Embattled Empire of Gold and Diamonds”

¹⁵⁷ Photo that shows Sytyi next to Touadera can be found [here](#).

Figure 14. Lengo Songo article promoting Wagner’s military operations in CAR¹⁵⁸

Russian instructors carried out reconnaissance and search operations in northern CAR, neutralizing 20 rebels

October 30, 2023

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From October 22 to 25, 2023, Russian instructors from the Wagner group conducted reconnaissance and search operations in the northwestern regions of the Central African Republic. The main aim of the operation was to dislodge rebel groups from areas where gold mines are located, the exploitation of which allows the Central African Republic to supplement the state budget and pay the salaries of the inhabitants of the Central African Republic working tirelessly. For the success of the operation, helicopters of FACA allies were used to land reconnaissance teams on rebel movement routes in order to block areas where the gangs are concentrated.

It must be emphasized that the intelligence officers and pilots of the Russian specialist air group fulfilled their mission perfectly, clearing the rebels' gold mines. Around twenty bandits from the MPC armed group under the leadership of Alkatim were neutralized, two of whom were identified. This is Ahmat Ibrahim Adjaje, a Chadian. As for the second, it is Sale Ajaje, who was the personal guard and assistant of Commander Ahmat Ibrahim Adjaje.

In June 2021, Syti was appointed as the General Director of Russian House (Maison Russe), a cultural center located near the Russian Embassy in Bangui.¹⁵⁹ The Russian House organizes events that promote Russian interests in CAR and hosts screenings of movies produced by Prigozhin.¹⁶⁰ As Sytyi explains in the *pravda.ru* interview, Russian House also offers Russian language and cultural education classes that are aimed at “enabling strengthened cooperation” between the two nations.

While the Wagner Group’s information operations and commercial ventures are less likely to make headline news than the deployment of armed mercenaries to African countries, this aspect of the Wagner quasi-PMC model is a significant development within the broader context of Russia’s great-power ambitions in Africa. By using a variety of curators that have no official link to the Kremlin, Russia is able to increase its foothold in a strategically contested region without the risks or obstacles that would accompany more overt forms of intervention. The establishment

¹⁵⁸ [Source](#).

¹⁵⁹ “Dimitri Sytyi, cadre de Wagner en Centrafrique”, *All Eyes on Wagner*, December 20, 2022.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

of pro-Kremlin media outlets in Russia's far-abroad is a tactic that was first developed by the Soviet KGB, but the outsourcing of this task to formally private actors that offer even higher degrees of plausible deniability is an important new feature of Russia's foreign influence campaigns.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ One prominent example of this tactic is Operation Infektion, an elaborate disinformation campaign in which the Soviet KGB founded the newspaper *Patriot* in India and later planted a fake story that claimed the US was responsible for the AIDS epidemic. See Thomas Boghardt, "Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign," *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 53, No. 4 December, 2009.

6.) Too Big to Fail: Wagner in Ukraine (2022-2023)

The third and final stage of Wagner’s development began with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which quickly led to a severe manpower shortage in the Russian conventional military. To address this problem without resorting to mobilization, Putin granted Prigozhin the right to recruit prisoners from the Russian penal colony system, offering six-month contracts in exchange for presidential pardons. This scheme proved to be an immediate success in addressing the manpower shortage, but it had the unintended effect of increasing Prigozhin’s public visibility and setting the conditions for a power struggle between the Wagner Group and the MoD that ultimately led to Prigozhin’s June 2023 mutiny. This chapter follows the Wagner Group’s development during this period and offers an explanation of how Prigozhin went from being a loyal surrogate of the Russian military in late 2022 to its main rival in early 2023.

Wagner as a force-multiplier (February 2022—October 2022)

While Wagner contractors were almost certainly involved in the war effort from the outset, their numbers remained relatively limited for several months after the invasion. British intelligence estimated the number of Wagner fighters in Ukraine to be approximately 1,000 in late March of 2022, which indicates that during the early months of the war, Wagner continued to rely on experienced contractors that could act as force-multipliers alongside conventional military units.¹⁶² During these early months, Wagner contractors took part in the battle for Popasna, a strategically vital town in the Luhansk region that saw intense fighting throughout April and May of 2022.¹⁶³ Prigozhin was first spotted in Ukraine around this time, which suggests he was directly involved with Wagner’s recruitment, funding, and coordination since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.¹⁶⁴

A new recruitment model (September 2022—January 2023)

As Russia’s conventional military began to encounter setbacks on the battlefield, the Kremlin was forced to rely on non-conventional tools to bolster its military posture in Ukraine. By

¹⁶² Pjotr Sauer, “Russia’s Private Military Contractor Wagner Comes out of the Shadows in Ukraine War.” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2022.

¹⁶³ Ladd Serwat, Héni Nsaibia, and Nichita Gurcov. “Moving out of The Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations around the World.” *ACLEDA*, August 23, 2023. 15-18. See also: Mason Clark and George Barros, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 17,” *Institute for the Study of War*, April 17, 2022

¹⁶⁴ <https://t.me/mozhemobyasnit/12117>

September of 2022, Prigozhin began personally visiting Russia’s penal colonies, offering six-month contracts with Wagner in exchange for full presidential pardons.¹⁶⁵ Soon after this new recruiting effort began, Prigozhin publicly admitted to his role as the head of the Wagner Group after years of denials and lawsuits against journalists who had suggested any connection.¹⁶⁶

Prigozhin’s new recruitment model proved to be an immediate success, as it was able to quickly provide a steady influx of bodies to stabilize Russia’s manpower shortage without resorting to full-scale mobilization. The British Ministry of Defense estimated the number of Wagner fighters in Ukraine to be 50,000 by the end of January 2023, a fifty-fold increase in less than a year.¹⁶⁷ Of these 50,000, roughly 40,000 were former inmates, while the remaining 10,000 were volunteer contractors, many of whom had some form of prior military experience. In some cases, it appears that Wagner units were in fact more capable than regular Russian motorized rifle brigades,¹⁶⁸ though there is a clear distinction between Wagner detachments composed of former inmates and those composed of more experienced contractors who were more valued and thus better equipped.¹⁶⁹ While the Wagner Group’s marketing efforts claim that all Wagner fighters are given equal treatment, interviews with former prisoners that joined Wagner indicate a high degree of segregation.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Sergey Goryashko, Anastasia Platonova, Andrey Zakharov, and Olga Prosvirova. “‘Из них такое поперло, что никто не ожидал’. Как заключенные реагируют на призывы вступить в ‘ЧВК Вагнера.’” *BBC News Русская служба*, September 17, 2022.

¹⁶⁶ “‘Сам почистил старое оружие’. Евгений Пригожин признался, что создал ‘ЧВК Вагнера.’” *BBC News Русская служба*. November 4, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ “‘Минобороны Великобритании: Численность ЧВК Вагнера в Украине - 50 тысяч человек.’” *Meduza*, January 20, 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Michael Kofman and Rob Lee. “Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military’s Ill-fated Force Design.” *War on the Rocks*. June 2, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Dmitrova, Darya. “CNN рассказал о тактике ЧВК «Вагнер», ссылаясь на Украинскую разведку.” *gazeta.ru*, January 24, 2023.

¹⁷⁰ In an [interview](#) with a former Wagner fighter who is now part of the GRU’s “Wolves” Brigade, he mentions that his first experience with Wagner was as a “К” (Кашник). A [blog post](#) published by “Diary of a Stormtrooper” explains that a variety of slang terms that were used to distinguish prisoners from regular contractors, including “К” (кашники) and “Project” (проектные).

Escalating tensions with the Ministry of Defense (January 2023—June 2023)

While the overall quality of Wagner units quickly deteriorated after the recruitment model changed, Wagner forces continued to play key roles in the fighting in Donetsk, most notably around the towns of Soledar and Bakhmut.¹⁷¹ In January of 2023, against the backdrop of cascading failures by the Russian military, Prigozhin began using Wagner’s military successes in Soledar to build Wagner’s reputation as the sole effective fighting force in the Russian military effort. In the days prior to the capture of Soledar—a strategically vital town on the outskirts of Bakhmut—tensions between Wagner and the MoD began to rise. On January 9, Prigozhin stated on his Telegram channel that the fight for Soledar was being waged “exclusively” by Wagner forces, likely sensing the MoD’s eagerness to take credit for a much-needed battlefield victory.¹⁷² After the city was finally taken on January 12, the Russian MoD credited conventional Russian forces while ignoring the Wagner Group entirely in official statements.¹⁷³ Responding to a journalist’s question about Soledar on January 15, Putin congratulated the Russian Ministry of Defense and General Staff, conspicuously omitting any mention of the Wagner Group.¹⁷⁴

Figure 15. Anton “Lotus” Elizarov and Yevgeny Prigozhin in Soledar (January, 2023)¹⁷⁵



¹⁷¹ Пуга Abishev, “Бои за Бахмут: почему Россия так упорно стремится захватить этот город?”, *ВВС Русская служба*, November 30, 2022.

¹⁷² https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/2347

¹⁷³ “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 13, 2023,” *Institute for the Study of War*, January 13, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ https://t.me/smotrim_ru/17276

¹⁷⁵ Screenshot taken from https://t.me/concordgroup_official/871.

As the Russian military began its push towards Bakhmut, Wagner forces remained heavily involved in the fighting, and the feud between Prigozhin and the MoD continued to escalate. With Prigozhin's popularity growing, the Russian military leadership began taking measures to undermine Wagner's combat effectiveness and stunt his growing popularity. In early 2023, Prigozhin admitted that he was no longer permitted to recruit from the prison system, which had by that point become the main source of manpower to backfill Wagner's ranks.¹⁷⁶ As the battle for Bakhmut dragged on, Prigozhin's criticism grew increasingly brazen, exemplified by his profanity-laden video address to Shoigu and Gerasimov, in which the Wagner leader stood against a backdrop of corpses and accused the Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff of orchestrating a "shell famine" to undermine Wagner's military effectiveness.¹⁷⁷

In early June, the Ministry of Defense announced that all "volunteer formations," would be required to sign contracts with the MoD by July 1, ostensibly as a way to grant these formations their "necessary legal status."¹⁷⁸ In actual fact, this appears to have been a way to pry control away from Prigozhin and bring Wagner forces under the direct control of the MoD. Prigozhin rightly perceived this move as an existential threat and immediately recoiled at the preposition, indicating that Wagner would under no circumstances sign a contract with the MoD.¹⁷⁹ Sensing that he was being pushed out, Prigozhin released a series of statements and long-form interviews in which he continued to berate the Russian military leadership with increasing severity. In the final video posted on his Telegram channel prior to the mutiny, Prigozhin took his criticism a step further, rejecting the Kremlin's stated war aims and undermining virtually all of the narratives central to the Russian propaganda effort.¹⁸⁰ That same day, Prigozhin released an audio recording claiming that the Russian military had conducted a rocket strike on a Wagner field camp,¹⁸¹ which was quickly followed by an announcement that Wagner fighters would embark on a "march of justice" with the stated goal of holding Russia's military leadership accountable for undermining the Wagner Group.

¹⁷⁶ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/426

¹⁷⁷ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/895

¹⁷⁸ Добровольческие отряды, их правовой статус, контракты с МО РФ. Темы совещания в ведомстве" ТАСС, June 10, 2023. Video: <https://x.com/NOELreports/status/1667810365869113344?s=20>

¹⁷⁹ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1194

¹⁸⁰ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1279

¹⁸¹ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1284

The principal-agent problem and the role of the Wagner media-sphere

The Wagner mutiny and Prigozhin's death have received a great deal of media coverage, but less attention has been given to understanding exactly *how* the relationship between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defense deteriorated so quickly and catastrophically. The dynamic between the MoD and Prigozhin that unfolded in the first half of 2023 is a textbook example of the dangers posed by the principal-agent problem in surrogate relationships. As Prigozhin's interests (protecting his monopoly on the semi-state PMC market) began to diverge from the MoD's interests (restoring the credibility of the Russian conventional military), the MoD quickly lost its ability to control a massive, illegal military formation that had served as a loyal and effective surrogate for nearly a decade.

Crucial to understanding this relationship is the Wagner media ecosystem. Semi-state PMCs have existed in Russia for more than a decade, but the Wagner experiment stands out as the first time that one of these organizations ventured into the world of social media. The rapid development of the Wagner "brand" proved to be a very effective way to increase recruiting numbers, but the extreme centralization around one personality turned out to be Wagner's fatal flaw. Prigozhin's efforts to build the "PMC Wagner" brand in late 2022 and early 2023 resulted in the rapid proliferation of Wagner-linked military bloggers and social media accounts, primarily on the popular Russian platforms VKontakte and Telegram. What was once a shadowy, covert organization quickly transformed into a social media phenomenon with an active user base of over 1.3 million on VKontakte alone.¹⁸² Wagner's social media presence itself was nothing new, but the scale that it reached would have been impossible to imagine prior to 2022, when the group's online presence was limited to a small number of VKontakte groups, such as the now-inactive "ЧВК Вагнер: военное обозрение," (PMC Wagner: Military Review) which served as a networking platform for current, former, and prospective Wagner contractors.

Wagner-linked Telegram channels, such as "Grey Zone" and "Reverse Side of the Medal," which provided a steady stream of real-time updates and footage from Wagner operations, have an even more developed user-base, with 550,000 and 380,000 subscribers respectively as of April 2024. Prigozhin's official Telegram channel ("Пресс-служба Пригожина") has over 900,000

¹⁸² Ben Dalton and Candace Rondeaux. "Rebranding the Russian Way of War."

subscribers, despite being effectively inactive since the mutiny. Even the new “official” Wagner Telegram channels that were established after Prigozhin’s mutiny (“Разгрузка Вагнера” and “WAGNER GROUP”) each have nearly 250,000 subscribers.

Without such a developed media presence, it is difficult to imagine how Prigozhin could have posed an existential threat to the Russian military leadership and the Putin regime. As Yandex search trends show, interest in the search queries “PMC Wagner” and “Prigozhin” within Russia grew sharply beginning in September 2022, the same month that Prigozhin admitted his role as head of the Wagner Group and began to experiment with social media. When Prigozhin was first spotted in Ukraine in mid-April 2022, there were around 70,000 monthly search queries for “Prigozhin.” By January of 2023, that number had increased to over 1.3 million, and by June—the month of Prigozhin’s mutiny—monthly searches skyrocketed to almost 13 million.

Figure 16. Yandex search trends (March 2022 to July 2023) for search query “Prigozhin”

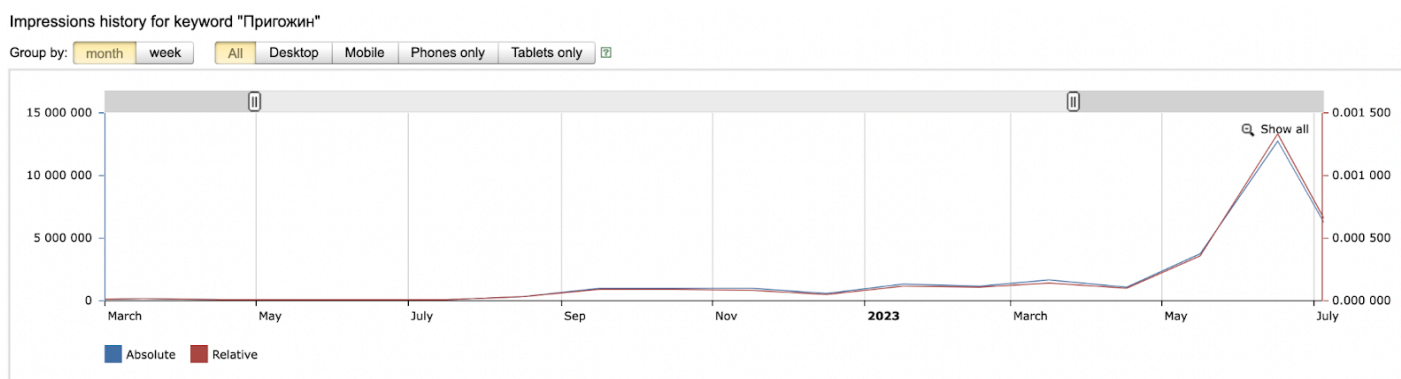
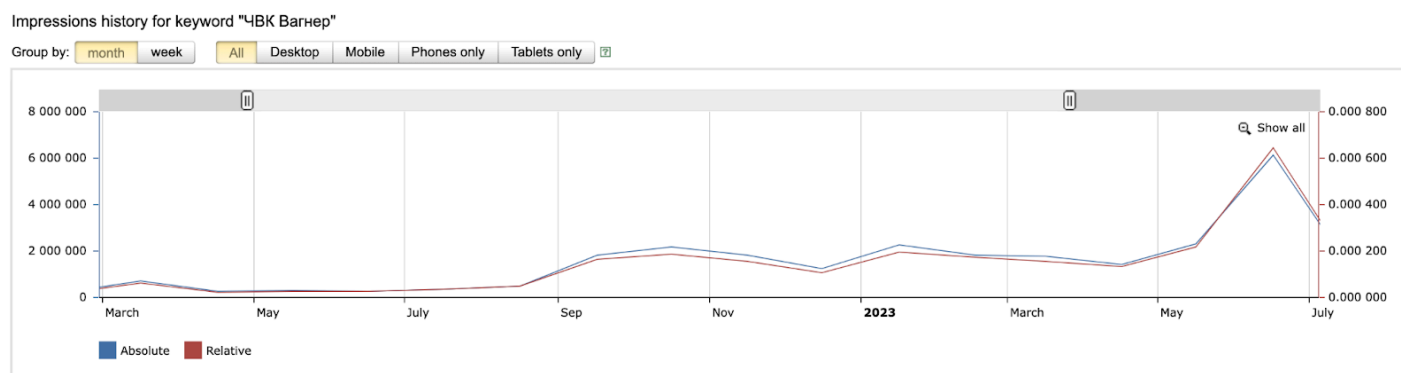


Figure 17. Yandex search trends (March 2022 to July 2023) for search query “PMC Wagner”



As these search trends demonstrate, Prigozhin's use of social media played a crucial role in increasing his name recognition, influence, and credibility in the span of less than a year. His reach and authority among certain sectors of the Russian public allowed him to dominate the narrative at critical moments of tension with Russia's military leadership, boosting perceptions of Wagner's combat effectiveness at the expense of the MoD's reputation. Without such a well-developed social media architecture, Prigozhin's arguments with the MoD would have been nothing more than internal disputes hidden from public view. Furthermore, Prigozhin's growing popularity ensured that it would be nearly impossible to replace him without the entire Wagner structure collapsing.¹⁸³ Despite denying any involvement with the Wagner Group for almost a decade, Prigozhin managed to effectively identify himself with Wagner's "brand" in a matter of months.

The Wagner Group was initially designed as a small, elite force whose operations could be obscured behind a veil of plausible deniability. As the case of the Slavonic Corps demonstrates, if one of these semi-state mercenary groups failed to meet expectations or stepped out of line, Russian authorities could simply choose to apply existing laws and arrest the organization's leadership. By stepping out of the shadows and accruing a massive base of public support on media platforms not controlled by the Kremlin, Prigozhin made himself central to the Wagner "brand" and thus ensured that the survival of the Wagner empire was tied to his own personal fate.

¹⁸³ "'Левада-центр': После мятежа почти 30% россиян заявили, что одобряют деятельность Евгения Пригожина. Неделей ранее таких людей было в два раза больше," *Meduza*, June 29, 2023.

7.) Wagner After the Mutiny

The frantic and confused response of Russian state media during and after Prigozhin's June 2023 mutiny attests to the fact that the Kremlin was genuinely taken by surprise by the sudden betrayal of a surrogate who had been loyal for nearly a decade.¹⁸⁴ After settling on a more-or-less unified narrative to explain the mutiny, the Kremlin set about managing the fallout. High-ranking officials in the Russian military and security services were tasked with figuring out how the Wagner empire, which now spanned across three continents, could be dismantled or restructured without jeopardizing vital streams of revenue and political influence. In the months following Prigozhin's death in August 2023, two broad recruiting structures stepped in to fill the gap: "PMC Redut" and the Military's Combat Army Reserve (BARS). This chapter begins by examining attempts to defang the remnants of the Wagner Group, focusing on the Russian MoD's efforts to dismantle Wagner's operations in Africa. It then turns to examining how the Russian state has modified the Wagner quasi-PMC model to develop the BARS and PMC Redut structures. The sections relating to BARS and PMC Redut formations seek to answer three main questions: who finances these formations, how are they managed at the operational level, and how do they attract recruits? Since an exhaustive analysis of the dozens of formations that are included in these structures is outside the scope of this paper, this chapter selects one formation from both BARS and PMC Redut that each show elements of continuity and divergence relative to the Wagner quasi-PMC model.

Attempts to salvage the Wagner empire

In the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny, the Kremlin has been faced with three options to manage the fallout: 1) abandon the Wagner model entirely, 2) preserve Wagner's existing structure under new leadership, or 3) carve up the Wagner empire. Early indications in the months following Prigozhin's mutiny show that the Kremlin has rejected the first option and chosen to pursue some combination of options two and three. Abandoning the Wagner model entirely would eliminate the threat of further instability, but dissolving such a massive structure would be prohibitively costly for the Russian state in both financial and reputational terms. By June of 2023, Wagner had become an integral part of Russia's force mobilization campaign in Ukraine and a critical source of income and influence in Africa.

¹⁸⁴ "Prigozhin and glossing over Russian fragility and cracks in military power," *EUvsDisInfo*, June 29, 2023.

Wagner in Belarus

In the aftermath of the mutiny, roughly 6,000 Wagner contractors that had previously fought in Ukraine—mostly former prisoners—relocated to Belarus, where they established a temporary base near the town of Osipovichi. In the weeks following the mutiny, these contractors began training the Belarussian military under the command of Sergei Chubko, a long-time Wagner contractor who previously worked in Syria and Libya.¹⁸⁵ In August 2023, satellite imagery showed that the Wagner camp was being slowly dismantled, and more recent estimates suggest that the number of Wagner contractors in Belarus has now dwindled to roughly 1,000.¹⁸⁶ In Russia, former Wagner commander Andrei “Sedoi” Troshev has been tasked with managing the remnants of Wagner’s recruiting infrastructure.¹⁸⁷ A month after Prigozhin’s death, he appeared in a meeting with Putin and Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov. In a video of the meeting, Putin references a prior conversation with Troshev, indicating that Troshev had been tasked with “the formation of volunteer divisions that can perform various military tasks, especially in the zone of the Special Military Operation.”¹⁸⁸ This meeting was quickly followed by a statement from press-secretary Dmitry Peskov, who clarified that Troshev now works in the Ministry of Defense, though his official role within the MoD remains unclear.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ “Журналисты установили личность командующего ЧВК “Вагнер” в Беларуси – им оказался уроженец Украины,” *Настоящее время*, June 26, 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Роман Васюкович, “Чем сейчас занимаются оставшиеся в Беларуси вагнеровцы,” *Настоящее время*, September 28, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ “Путин обсудил с Евкуровым и Трошевым формирование добровольческих подразделений,” *ТАСС*, September 29, 2023. Troshev has likely been involved with Wagner since the group’s outset. He was photographed in the Kremlin at an award ceremony in 2015 alongside Vladimir Putin and three other Wagner commanders. After his defection to the MoD, Wagner-linked Telegram channels have attempted to distance themselves from Troshev and downplay his significance within the organization. <https://t.me/wagnernew/10584>

¹⁸⁸ “Путин обсудил с Евкуровым и Трошевым работу по оказанию равной поддержки бойцам СВО,” *ТАСС*, September 29, 2023.

¹⁸⁹ “Песков заявил, что входивший в руководство группы “Вагнера” Трошев работает в Минобороны,” *ТАСС*, September 29, 2023.

Figure 18. Meeting between Putin, Yevkurov, and Troshev on September 28, 2023¹⁹⁰



Rehabilitating Wagner in Russia

The primary veterans’ organization that handles public advocacy for the Wagner Group is the League for the Protection of the Interests of Veterans of Local Wars and Military Conflicts. At least one branch of this organization was previously managed by Aleksandr Maloletko, a close associate of Prigozhin who worked as an instructor in CAR.¹⁹¹ An archive of the organization’s website from 2019 also lists Andrei Troshev as the organization’s main manager, suggesting that this particular organization has been linked to Wagner for at least several years.¹⁹² Notably, the current registration for the League for the Protection of the Interests of Veterans shows that the organization’s acting director is Dmitrii “Salem” Podolskiy, a veteran of the GRU’s 14th Spetsnaz Brigade.¹⁹³ As Prigozhin’s personal Telegram channel and other Wagner-linked channels indicate, Podolskiy lost an arm while commanding Wagner’s Fifth Assault Brigade (5-й ИИО) during the assault of Bakhmut in 2023. Podolski's call-sign, “Salem,” was also listed by

¹⁹⁰ [Source](#).

¹⁹¹ “Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization”, *treasury.gov*, January 26, 2023.

¹⁹² Archive can be accessed [here](#).

¹⁹³ The registration number for the League for the Protection of the Interests of Veterans of Local Wars and Military Conflicts is 1167800053123.

official Wagner Telegram channels among the organization’s seven main managers after Prigozhin’s mutiny.¹⁹⁴

In October 2023, rumors began circulating that “PMC Wagner” would become a formation of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya). Local media outlets and Wagner-linked Telegram channels reported that Yevgeny Prigozhin’s son, Pavel Prigozhin, was engaged in negotiations about preserving the brand and assets of the Wagner Group while being fully subordinated to Rosgvardiya.¹⁹⁵ Around the same time, the Duma introduced a package of bills that would create a legal basis for Rosgvardiya to field its own “volunteer formations.”¹⁹⁶ On December 25, 2023, the bill was passed into law, but in the months that followed, the Wagner-Rosgvardiya project appears to have suffered from a lack of interest among potential recruits. On February 5, 2024, the Telegram channel “Разгрузка Вагнера” released a video in which Anton “Lotus” Elizarov—the Wagner commander responsible for the capture of Soledar—attempted to dispel rumors that the project was floundering.¹⁹⁷ According to Elizarov, training was underway on Wagner’s new training base near the Russian city Rostov, and Wagner formations would soon be deployed to Belarus and Africa. Six weeks later, the Telegram channel “VChK-OGPU” suggested that Elizarov’s video was a bluff and that the Wagner-Rosgvardiya project had been abandoned after it failed to recruit more than a few hundred fighters.¹⁹⁸ More recently, the Telegram channel “WAGNER GROUP” has begun actively advertising for positions in the “distant direction” (дальнее направление), which suggests that recruits will be working exclusively in Africa.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ Podolskii appeared in a [video](#) published on Prigozhin’s personal Telegram channel on May 2, 2023. In the video, he has a prosthetic arm. In a separate [post](#) on the same channel, Podolskii is identified as having the call-sign “Salem.” Another [post](#) on the main Wagner Telegram channel that was published after Prigozhin’s mutiny lists an unnamed individual with the call-sign “Salem” as one of seven individuals that heads Wagner’s headquarters and assault groups.

¹⁹⁵ <https://t.me/vchkogpu/42726> ; see also “ЧВК «Вагнер» заявила о переходе под контроль Росгвардии и возвращении на войну в Украину”, *The Moscow Times*, October 30, 2023.

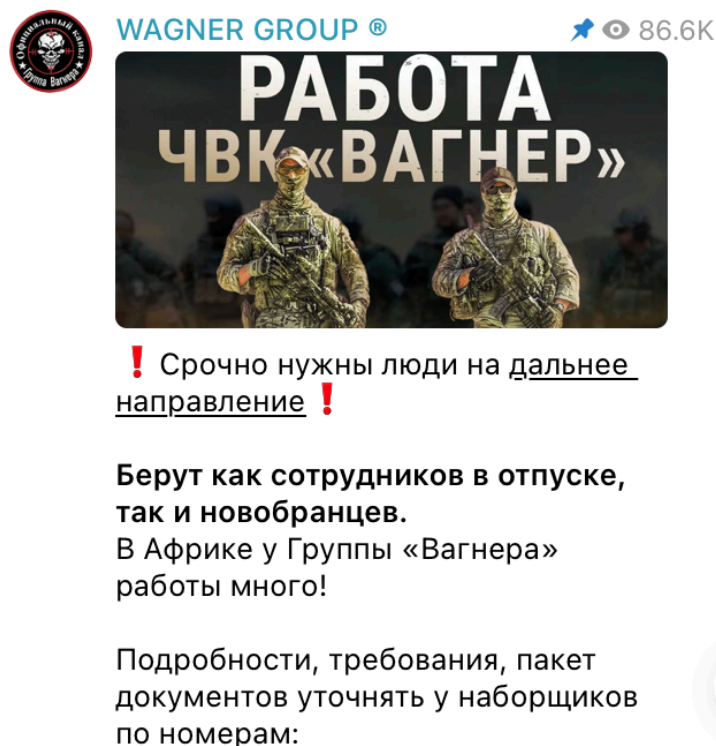
¹⁹⁶ “Внесен пакет законопроектов, разрешающий Росгвардии иметь свои добровольческие формирования” *duma.gov.ru*, September 22, 2023.

¹⁹⁷ https://t.me/razgruzka_vagnera/465

¹⁹⁸ <https://t.me/vchkogpu/46642>

¹⁹⁹ <https://t.me/wagnernew/15007>

Figure 19. Wagner recruiting announcement, April 5, 2024²⁰⁰



Syria

In Syria, the transition has appeared to be relatively seamless, as Wagner’s presence in the country had already dwindled significantly prior to the mutiny due to the relocation of contractors to Ukraine. Since the Russian military maintains a substantial footprint in Syria, it was well-positioned to absorb the several-hundred Wagner contractors left in the country, who were given the option to either sign contracts with the MoD or leave the country.²⁰¹

Africa

The Kremlin’s main priority after the mutiny has been preserving Wagner’s operations in Africa. Despite the high degree of coordination between the MoD and Wagner in Ukraine and Syria, Wagner appears to have been granted a great deal of autonomy in Africa, and absorbing

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Maya Gebeily, “Syria brought Wagner fighters to heel as mutiny unfolded in Russia,” *Reuters*, July 7, 2023.

Prigozhin's massive network of shell-companies and business agreements will not be an easy task for the Russian state. The picture that has emerged in recent months suggests that the Kremlin will keep the Wagner structure intact as much as possible, but Wagner operations will be more carefully managed by state officials.

A month after Prigozhin's mutiny, Putin hosted the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. During the summit, a large Russian delegation led by Putin met with the delegation from Mali, and as the members of the Russian delegation introduced themselves, one individual stood out: Andrei Averyanov.²⁰² Unlike other members of the delegation, who stated their official titles, Averyanov simply stated his position as "security." A Bellingcat investigation previously identified Averyanov as a GRU Major General who commands Unit 29155, which has been repeatedly implicated in foreign covert action and assassinations, including the poisoning of Russian defector Sergei Skripal in 2018.²⁰³ While there are no previous links between Averyanov and Wagner, his presence as part of the Russian delegation in meetings with African leaders was an early sign that he will likely play some role in managing the remnants of the Wagner empire.

In August, a Russian delegation led by Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov visited four African countries: Libya, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, and Mali.²⁰⁴ The stated purpose of the visit was discussing "strengthening defense and security cooperation,"²⁰⁵ though the real aim was likely understanding how Wagner operations were structured in these countries and how those operations could be reconfigured under the management of different quasi-PMCs or directly subordinated to the MoD. In videos of these meetings, Yevkurov appears next to Averyanov and Konstantin Mirzayants, the head of Redut/Shield STG.²⁰⁶

In the Central African Republic, existing management structures and personnel remain more or less intact. Vitali Perfilev, who serves as the security adviser to President Touadera, continues to

²⁰² Christo Grozev, X, July 31, 2023. <https://shorturl.at/cqrZ2>

²⁰³ "В операции по подрыву склада оружия в Чехии участвовал старший офицер ГРУ," *Bellingcat*, April 25, 2021.

²⁰⁴ "Sécurité : La Fédération de Russie réaffirme son soutien aux autorités de la Transition," *Burkina24*, August 31, 2023. "Глава Мали обсудил с делегацией из РФ вопросы укрепления сотрудничества в области обороны," *TACC*, September 1, 2023.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Денис Коротков. "Без «Щита» Служба и смерть в еще одной частной военной компании, которой в России официально нет," *Новая Газета*, July 28, 2019.

oversee training and military operations in the country, though it is possible that someone closer to the MoD may take his place in the near future.²⁰⁷ Political and information operations continue to be run by Dmitrii Sytyi, the long-time Prigozhin associate and head of the Russian House in CAR who openly admitted his long-standing connection to Wagner in a September 2023 interview.²⁰⁸

Figure 20. Poster in Bangui, CAR with the slogans, “The Central African Republic is hand in hand with Russia” and “Talk a little, work a lot”²⁰⁹



Broadly speaking, the future of Wagner operations will involve a mix of continuity and substitution. In Africa, the Wagner model proved to be an effective mechanism that enabled power projection in a strategically vital region and provided sanctions-resistant revenue streams through energy and mining contracts. Trusted managers will maintain their positions, likely with increased oversight from the GRU. Some more vital operations may be subsumed entirely by the GRU, while guard-duty and train-and-equip missions can be picked up by smaller pseudo-PMCs

²⁰⁷ Юрий Сафронов, “Дело «Вагнера» в Африке продолжается,” *Новая газета*, July 29, 2023.

²⁰⁸ Rachel Chason and Barbara Debut, “In Wagner’s largest African outpost, Russia looks to tighten its grip,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2023.

Video of Sytyi interview: https://www.pravda.ru/world/1882555-dmitrii_sytyi/

²⁰⁹ [Source](#).

that still offer some measure of plausible deniability despite their close ties with the GRU. The names and leadership may change, but the overall structure will likely remain the same.

Wagner's replacements: BARS and PMC "Redut"

The Russian military's manpower shortage in Ukraine remains a significant problem for the Kremlin, and backfilling military losses without resorting to full-scale mobilization will require a steady flow of recruits who are willing to voluntarily join the Russian war effort. Due to the relatively poor reputation of the Russian military and the requirement that official MoD soldiers (both mobilized and contracted) must serve until the end of the so-called "special military operation," Wagner's recruitment model presented a very attractive option that allowed contractors to receive similar salaries while only committing to six-month contracts. After Prigozhin's mutiny poisoned the Wagner brand, the Kremlin has been forced to rely on other, less developed quasi-PMCs and volunteer formations to support force mobilization in Ukraine. In the months since Prigozhin's death, it appears that the Kremlin has focused its efforts towards further developing two existing recruiting structures that operate very similarly to the Wagner Group but are less centralized and more closely managed by the MoD.

While some of these newer quasi-PMCs and volunteer formations emerged after the Wagner mutiny, many others already existed on a much smaller scale before the mutiny. In a video posted to the Telegram channel of military blogger Aleksandr Simonov ("Позывной Брюс") on April 21, 2023, Prigozhin indicated that a variety of new Wagner-like formations had been deployed to Ukraine in late 2022 and early 2023. In the video, Prigozhin explains this new development as a move by MoD leadership and other private curators to gradually replace the Wagner Group with a variety of less powerful groups:

Today we went and dealt with the newly created PMCs. The whole country decided that they, like PMC Wagner, can save the motherland. And therefore, instead of giving us the opportunity to recruit people and teach them how to fight, all sorts of different and incomprehensible things are being created.... This is the main problem today that exists with PMCs in particular: they're trying to dilute PMC Wagner, so that it is not one big force that can play a role in domestic politics. That's the first thing. Second, everyone is saying that someday there will be a struggle for power and everyone needs to have their

own private army. You see, people who have money think collecting PMCs is an awesome new trend. And that's why PMCs, including the Gazprom PMCs like Potok, which we call blue Potok (голубой поток) are beginning to breed. All sorts of PMCs—the Gazprom PMCs, [PMC] Potok, PMC Bokarev, PMC Redut and so on.²¹⁰

The Country's Combat Army Reserve (BARS)

The first of these structures, BARS (боевой армейский резерв страны), represents the more official of the two variants. Contractors sign official contracts with the MoD in enlistment offices, and each BARS formation is officially registered as a part of Military Unit 22179, a motor-rifle brigade based in the Rostov region.²¹¹ In practice, however, BARS formations are directly subordinated to the MoD, and Unit 22179 simply maintains a list of the contractors on its roster.²¹² It is not clear exactly how many of these BARS formations exist, but the total number is likely somewhere between 30 and 40. The most striking feature of this model is the role of regional “curators” who assist in financing BARS formations, often using personal wealth or regional budgets to fund recruitment campaigns and facilitate the purchase of military equipment.

BARS-30 / “PMC Convoy”

While an exhaustive description of the dozens of BARS formations is outside the scope of this report, BARS-30—better known as “PMC Convoy”—serves as a useful example that showcases how the BARS system finances, manages, and utilizes volunteer formations. PMC Convoy's two main sponsors are Sergei Aksyonov, the governor of occupied Crimea, and Arkadii Rotenberg, a Russian oligarch with close ties to Putin.²¹³ Advertising for the group frequently appears on the state-owned television channel *Crimea 24*, which includes numbers to call to speak with recruiters.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ <https://t.me/brussinif/5885>, translation my own.

²¹¹ “‘Армия на полставки’. Кто управляет российскими нерегулярными формированиями, воюющими в Украине?,” *BBC News Русская Служба*, November 20, 2023.

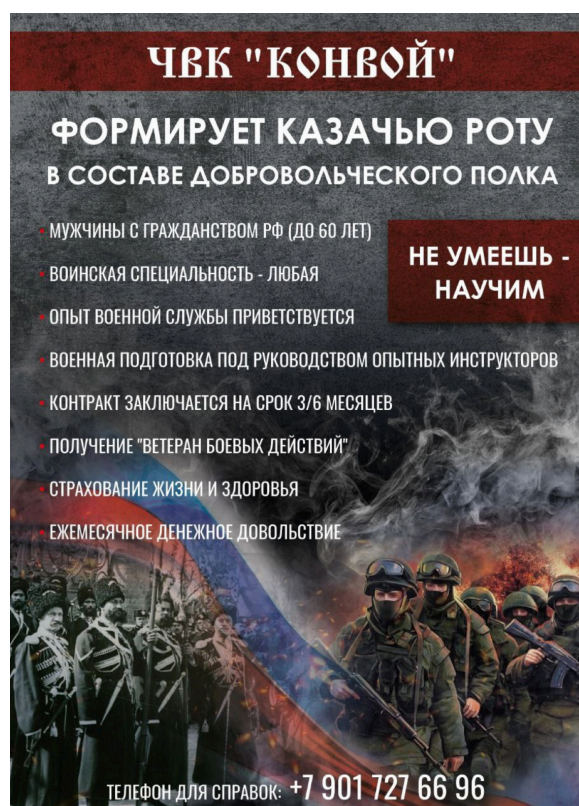
²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Денис Коротков, “Казачи, эльф и Аркадий Ротенберг: Как устроена ЧВК «Конвой» и кто ее финансирует” *Dossier Center*, August 14, 2023.

²¹⁴ <https://t.me/tvcrimea24/48223>

At the operational level, PMC Convoy is run by Konstantin “Mazai” Pikalov, a former associate of Prigozhin who briefly worked for Wagner in Africa.²¹⁵ Unlike many other Wagner contractors, Pikalov lacks a professional background in the Russian conventional military. Since 1993, Pikalov worked for a variety of PSCs in Moscow and St. Petersburg before he began selling his private security services to a variety of African customers in the mid-2010s.²¹⁶

Figure 21. PMC Convoy’s first call for recruits in November, 2022²¹⁷



Pikalov is listed on the corporate registries of two companies: the “Saint-Petersburg City Cossack Society ‘Convoy’” (SPbGKO Convoy) and the LLC “Military-Security Company ‘Convoy.’”²¹⁸ Both companies’ registries list their primary form of business as “activities related to military security,” and according to reporting by *Dossier Center*, the two companies are used in tandem to shuttle money to PMC Convoy from a variety of corporate financiers.²¹⁹ In the span

²¹⁵ Коротков, “Казачи, эльф и Аркадий Ротенберг”

²¹⁶ Ibid.

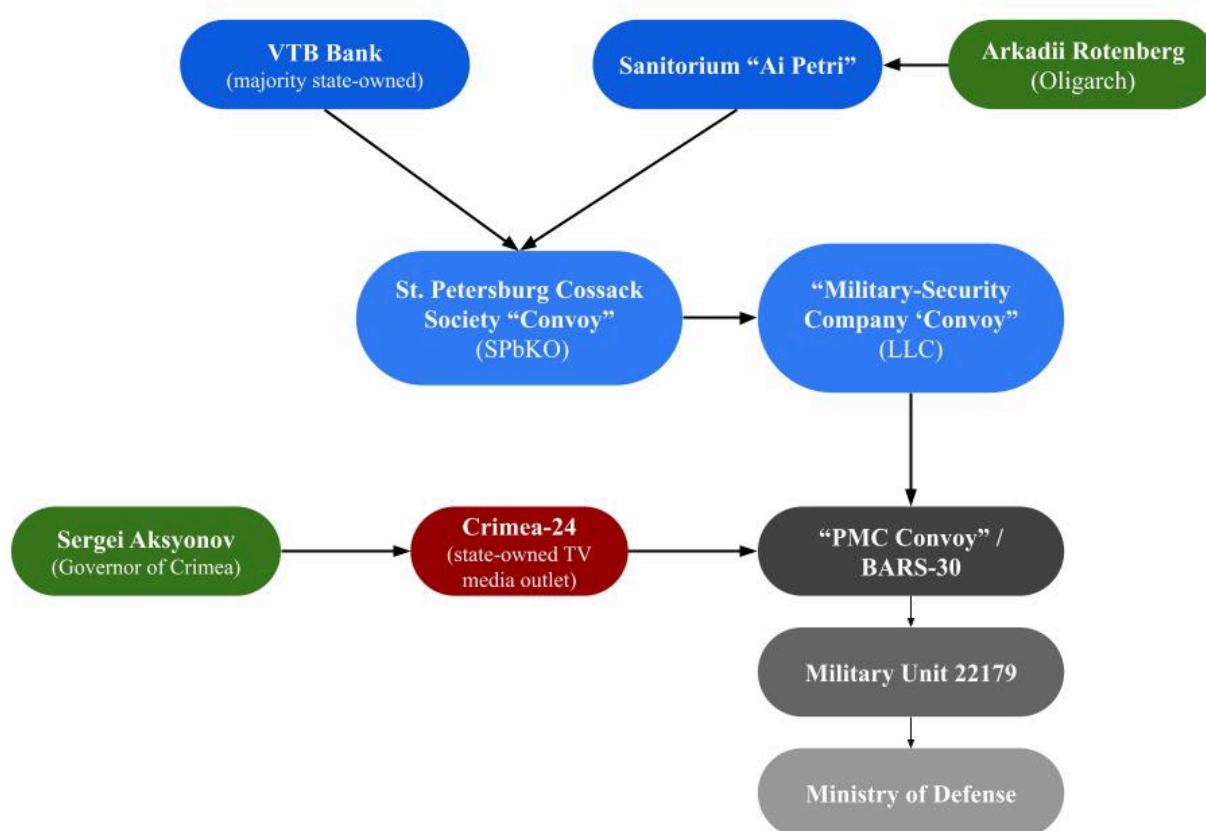
²¹⁷ <https://t.me/convoywe/3>

²¹⁸ “Санкт-Петербургское городское Казачье Общество ‘Конвой’” (ОГРН 1097800006260) and “Общество с ограниченной ответственностью ‘военно-охранная компания ‘Конвой’” (ОГРН 1154712000024) respectively. The former organization is a city-level Cossack society, part of a hierarchical structure of non-profit organizations aimed at preserving Cossack culture in accordance with federal legislation.

²¹⁹ Коротков, “Казачи, эльф и Аркадий Ротенберг”.

of less than two months in the fall of 2022, Convoy received more than 400 million rubles from several Russian companies. A large portion of this sum came from a Crimea joint-stock company listed as “Sanatorium ‘Ai Petri,’” a Crimea-based tourist resort acquired by Arkadii Rotenberg in 2019.²²⁰ In late 2022, Sanatorium “Ai Petri” donated 120 million rubles to SPbGKO Convoy, a sum that was more than four times larger than the company’s profits that year.²²¹ Another significant donation (two payments of 100 million rubles each) came from the majority state-owned VTB Bank. Once the money was received by SPbGKO Convoy—an organization that does not even have its own website—it was then transferred to LLC Military-Security Company ‘Convoy,’ where it could be used to fund the purchase of equipment for Convoy’s contractors.²²²

Figure 22. “PMC Convoy” / BARS-30 financing scheme



²²⁰ Надежда Фёдорова, “Аркадий Ротенберг раскрыл свои туристические активы в Крыму. Миллиардер назвал себя бенефициаром пяти гостиничных объектов на полуострове”, *rbc.ru*, April 12, 2021.

²²¹ Ibid. Registration for Rotenberg’s sanatorium is ОГРН 1169102093797.

²²² Ibid.

In a long-form interview with Pikalov released on Convoy’s RuTube channel, he mentions that Convoy takes orders directly from the MoD, which is supported by documents on Convoy’s own Telegram channel that indicate “PMC Convoy” is technically “BARS-30” and—like all BARS formations—is formally a part of Military Unit 22179.²²³ Convoy/BARS-30 is simply one of many reserve formations that operate in such a manner, but the model itself appears to be an attractive alternative for prospective recruits who distrust Russian conventional military leadership or are not prepared to commit to an indefinite period of military service.²²⁴ Convoy’s recruiting strategy draws heavily on imperial nostalgia, framing itself as a 21st century analog of the Tsar’s Imperial Cossack Guard. As of late 2023, Convoy was still seeking recruits—especially combat drone operators—to work in Ukraine and Africa.

Figure 23. Call for drone operators to work in Ukraine in Africa (August, 2023)²²⁵



²²³ Interview with Pikalov: <https://shorturl.at/dyEFJ> ; documents indicating that Convoy is the same formation as BARS-30: <https://t.me/convoywe/422>

²²⁴ In a March 2024 [interview](#) with a former Wagner contractor currently fighting in the “Espanola” formation, he indicates a high degree of skepticism towards the MoD. When asked to give advice to prospective recruits wondering which formation to join, he responds, “I would probably put the Ministry of Defense at the end of the list.”

²²⁵ Source: <https://t.me/convoywe/2040>

The GRU's shadow-recruitment network: "PMC Redut"

The second structure being used to compensate for Wagner's absence is commonly referred to as "PMC Redut." Despite the common name, it does not appear that "PMC Redut" has any relationship to the PSC Redut/Shield operating in Syria on behalf of Gennadi Timchenko that was described in section three (see Appendix 2). "PMC Redut" is not an officially registered PMC, but rather a semi-state recruiting network run by the GRU that includes dozens of smaller formations that often have no connection to each other besides being curated by the GRU. Some PMC Redut formations have been involved in Ukraine at least since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, but the number and size of individual formations under the Redut umbrella has been growing rapidly since the Wagner mutiny. Rather than being a more-or-less unified structure like Wagner, PMC Redut appears to be nothing more than the name given to a project by the GRU to recruit unofficial, plausibly-deniable contractors for operations in Ukraine, Syria, and Africa.

Unlike BARS formations, which are technically a part of the MoD, Redut formations have no official connection to the Russian military. Contractors sign ordinary work agreements for a period of six months with non-existent companies and do not receive the legal status of "servicemember" (военнослужащий) or the benefits that such a designation would entail.²²⁶ Two recent investigations by the Radio Svoboda Russia and Ukraine investigative teams (Схемы and Система) revealed that at least one Redut formation, the Wolves Brigade, was heavily involved in Ukraine since the early days of the invasion, and captured documents indicate that the Wolves Brigade reports directly to the GRU's 16th Spetsnaz Brigade.²²⁷ This particular brigade of the GRU has also been linked to other Redut formations, including "Тигры", "Невский", "Ветер 117", and "Рыси."²²⁸ The Wolves Brigade continues to be active in Ukraine and has gained popularity in the Russian media, evidenced by a special segment that appeared on the state-run Russian television channel *Rossiya 1* in late October of 2023.²²⁹ In the segment, prominent military blogger Aleksandr Sladkov speaks with various members of the Wolves

²²⁶ "“Армия на полставки,” BBC Русская Служба. Contracts stipulate that hired “specialists” will perform tasks that may include work “connected with risk to life.”

²²⁷ "Схемы" and "Система", "Уловка 'Редут': Как ГРУ создало фантомную ЧВК для вербовки тысяч россиян на войну в Украине," *Настоящее время*, December 1, 2023.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ https://t.me/DRO_Wolves/1388

Brigade, many of whom appear to be over the age of forty. In the video, fighters' living spaces are decorated with VDV flags and regalia, suggesting that this particular formation has more in common with the old Wagner recruitment model, which primarily recruited experienced veterans from Russia's elite military formations.

An investigation conducted by the Russian-language service of the BBC uncovered a plethora of similar volunteer formations that have increased their recruiting efforts in recent months. When investigators called recruiters, virtually all of them admitted that joining their formations involved signing contracts with "PMC Redut," not with the MoD directly. As one recruiter put it, Redut is "like Wagner, but smaller. Our commanders are not army officers, but we carry out orders from the Ministry of Defense."²³⁰ Investigators from the "Схемы" and "Система" teams received similar replies from recruiters representing other formations, including "Тигры," "Ветер 117," and "Рысь."²³¹ Despite minor variations in how the system is explained to prospective recruits, these conversations make it clear that these smaller formations are all part of a larger recruiting effort managed by the GRU under the broad umbrella of a mythical "PMC Redut" that has no official connection to the MoD.

Figure 24. Responses from recruiters representing various "PMC Redut" formations²³²

ЧТО ВЕРБОВЩИКИ ГОВОРЯТ О СВЯЗИ "РЕДУТА" С ГРУ И МИНОБОРОНЫ

<p>Рекрутер отряда "Тигры" с позывным "Гонец":</p> <p><i>"Мы работаем с министерством обороны, Главным разведуправлением... ["Редут"] – это аналог ЧВК. Мы получаем деньги от министерства обороны. Напрямую".</i></p>	<p>Рекрутер "Джамал":</p> <p><i>"У нас "Ветер 117" – это подразделение, входящее в состав 16-й бригады ГРУ, мы именно входим в состав бригады. У нас только разведка. У нас штурмов нету".</i></p>	<p>Заведующая работой с личным составом в СДД Надежда Лашкарева:</p> <p><i>"Система "Редут" – это, ну, гэрэушные".</i></p>
<p>Рекрутер в отряды, связанные с СДД, с позывным "Зодиак":</p> <p><i>"Редут" – это ЧВК, но под патронажем министерства обороны".</i></p>	<p>Рекрутер "Игрок":</p> <p><i>"Разведка своих не бросает".</i></p>	<p>Рекрутер отряда "Рысь" с позывным "Игрок":</p> <p><i>"[Контракт] с частной фирмой, но платит МО. Все выплаты тоже от них".</i></p>

²³⁰ "Армия на полставки," BBC Русская Служба.

²³¹ "Уловка 'Редут'," Настоящее Время.

²³² Ibid.

“PMC Española”

One formation that stands out as perhaps the most successful formation under the PMC Redut umbrella is Española, which refers to itself as a “Fan’s Volunteer Reconnaissance Brigade.” Española was founded as a unit within “Vostok,” a DNR volunteer battalion initially led by Aleksandr Khodakovskiy, a veteran of the elite “Alfa” unit in Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU).²³³ At some point, Española left Vostok and was absorbed by the PMC Redut network, and the group has quickly set itself apart as one of the most successful and popular formations within that structure. Española specifically aims its recruiting efforts at Russian “hooligans,” a violent subculture of Russian soccer fans that is notorious for its connections to far-right and neo-nazi ideology.

The investigative outlet *Vazhniye Istorii* reported that a significant amount of Española’s financing comes from Viktor Shendrik, a former member of the FSB’s elite “Vypel” counter-terrorism unit who began working as the head of Russian Railways’ (РЖД) security service in 2016.²³⁴ As of July 2021, Shendrik was also on the board of directors for the company *Transtelekom*, the second largest telecommunications company in Russia.²³⁵

Exactly *how* Shendrik transfers money to Española is less clear than the PMC Convoy scheme, but the money is ultimately used by Ilya Khanin—who describes himself as the head of Española’s “humanitarian wing”—to purchase supplies for Española fighters.²³⁶ However the Española financing scheme works, it is clear that the organization is extremely well funded, as videos posted on the group’s Telegram channel show fighters equipped with much better equipment than their counterparts in the Russian conventional military.

Española has also spawned several popular field commanders, some of whom have their own social media presence. The formation’s main commander, Stanislav Orlov (callsign “Ispanets”),

²³³ Роман Анин and Роман Романовский, “Братья Ротенберги создают свою частную армию из ЧВК футбольных фанатов”, *Важные истории*, March 4, 2024.

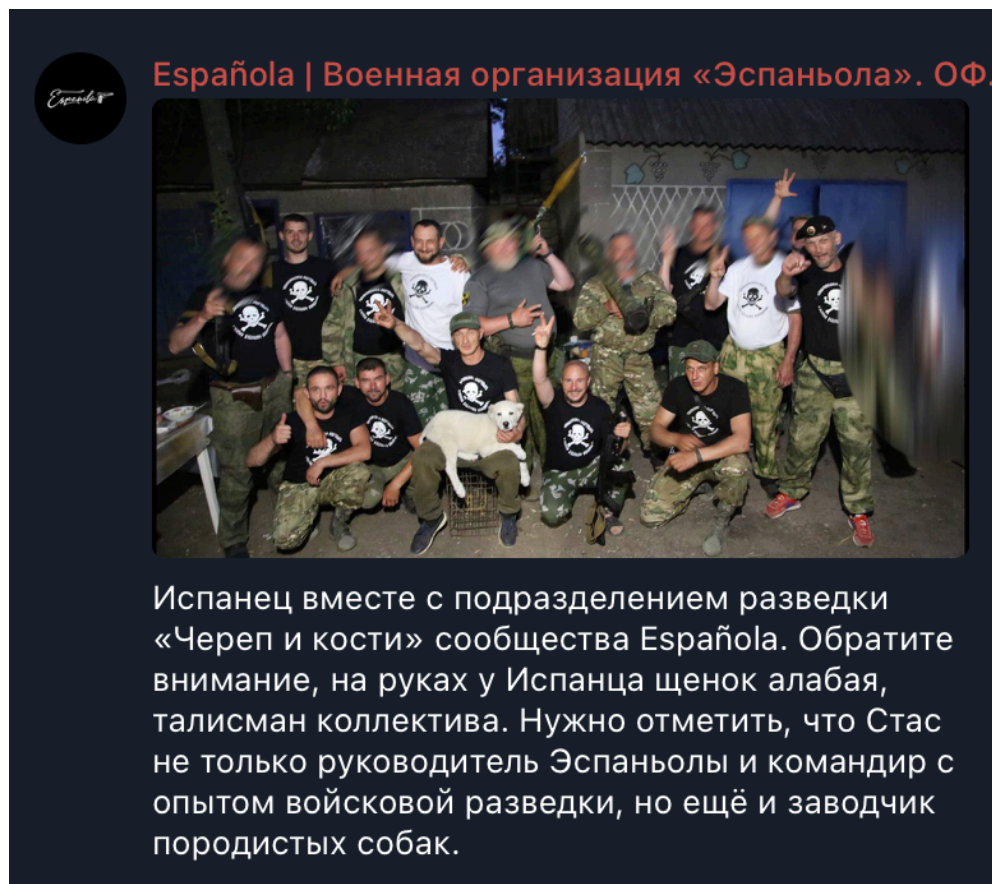
²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ [Archive](#) for the company website of Transtelekom, which lists Shendrick as a member of the board and describes him as the “head of Russian Railways’ security department.”

²³⁶ Video in which Khanin explains his role within Española can be viewed [here](#). Relevant conversation begins at 00:50.

has been fighting in Donbass since 2014, where he led the “Skull and Crossbones” reconnaissance company, a volunteer formation that was involved in intense fighting around the Ukrainian town of Gorlovka.²³⁷ Orlov remains the operational commander of Española, and he is regularly featured on the group’s Telegram channel as part of the formation’s recruitment efforts.

Figure 25. Telegram post featuring Orlov and other “Skull and Bones” fighters²³⁸



Like the Wagner Group, Española has successfully used Telegram to build a recognizable brand and attract new recruits from sectors of the Russian population that might otherwise not be interested in military service. The organization’s Telegram channel, “Española, Военная организация,” boasts nearly 60,000 subscribers and regularly posts professionally produced recruitment videos showcasing combat footage and interviews with fighters. Russian military

²³⁷ “Вечерняя Москва”, “Поле боя вместо стадиона: футбольные фанаты отправились на Донбасс” *Рамблер новости*, September 8, 2022.

²³⁸ Source: <https://t.me/spainrus/157>

correspondents and media outlets have also reported extensively on Española, portraying the group as a positive outlet for troubled young men with violent tendencies.²³⁹ More recently, Española began recruiting women, and there are already several women fighting in Española, typically as snipers or combat drone operators.²⁴⁰ One of these women, a former professional ballet dancer who uses the callsign “Valkyrie,” has already risen in the ranks to become the second-in-command of an assault company.²⁴¹

Figure 26. Photo posted on Española’s Telegram channel on International Women’s Day, 2023²⁴²



Perhaps the most striking personality in the Española media ecosystem is Mikhail “Pitbull” Turkanov, an assault company commander whose personal Telegram channel has more than 20,000 subscribers. Notably, Turkanov was fined in 2019 for public display of Nazi tattoos and frequently posts far-right and antisemitic content on his personal Telegram channel.²⁴³ In October 2023, Turkanov was personally awarded his second Order of Courage from Deputy Chief of the GRU Vladimir Alekseev, whom many consider the mastermind behind both Wagner and PMC

²³⁹ https://t.me/Sladkov_plus/6171 . See also: “Подразделение ‘Эспаньола’ в Донбассе готовит из фанатов бойцов для СВО” РИА Новости, June 27, 2023.

²⁴⁰ One of Española’s first recruitment videos aimed at women in particular: <https://t.me/spainrus/947>

²⁴¹ Special report by the English-language Russian propaganda outlet *Sputnik* that features “Valkyrie”: <https://t.me/spainrus/1048>

²⁴²

²⁴³ “Странники неонациста и бойца ММА Михаила Турканова сообщили о вручении ему ордена «Мужества» на войне в Украине” *Новая газета*, February 6, 2023.

Redut.²⁴⁴ In a video of the award ceremony, Alekseev personally hands Turkanov a medal against the backdrop of a Soviet flag and a portrait of Putin.²⁴⁵

Figure 27. First Deputy of the GRU Vladimir Alekseev awards “Española” commander Mikhail “Pitbull” Turkanov with his second Order of Courage medal²⁴⁶



Future outlook for BARS and “PMC Redut” formations

While the dozens of volunteer formations that fall under the BARS and Redut structures lack the centralized “brand” that made Wagner’s recruitment efforts so effective, early indications suggest that the combination of the two will be enough to fill the gap left by Wagner’s absence, especially as select Redut and BARS formations have been increasing their use of social media to build their brands. From the Russian state’s perspective, this revision of the Wagner semi-state PMC model is an attempt to minimize the risks by exerting tighter control through official structures and preventing a single individual from accruing too much power. When considering

²⁴⁴ In Alekseev’s video-address to Wagner fighters during the mutiny, he claims that he was involved with Wagner since the organization’s beginning in 2014. Alekseev’s address can be viewed [here](#).

²⁴⁵ Футурье, Эдуард. “Боец «Эспаньолы» Питбуль получил орден Мужества”, ridus.ru, October 16, 2023.

²⁴⁶ Ревнивцев, Андрей. “Главный ужас Буданова: Крёстный отец “Вагнера”, о котором не говорят вслух.” tsargrad.tv, November 13, 2023. Video of the award ceremony can be viewed [here](#) on Española’s official Telegram channel.

the two models through the lens of the principal-agent problem, it is clear that in the BARS/Redut model, the principal delegates less autonomy to the agent, which minimizes the risk of diverging interests but limits the degree of plausible deniability. However, BARS and Redut formations are significantly smaller and far less well known than Wagner, which may help sustain plausible deniability at least for some time. Since Wagner's plausible deniability had effectively vanished by the beginning of 2023, "PMC Redut" formations will likely be tasked with operating in sensitive areas where the Russian state would rather use a surrogate than a conventional military option.

8.) Conclusion:

Since its emergence in 2014, the Wagner Group showed a high degree of ability and willingness to meet the Kremlin's changing needs across a variety of contexts. In contrast to Russia's sclerotic and notoriously reform-resistant conventional military, the Wagner Group repeatedly proved itself to be flexible, innovative, and adept at implementing large-scale institutional changes in response to shifting demands.

The failure of the Wagner Group itself should not be confused with the failure of the Wagner model of quasi-PMC usage. Despite the catastrophic effects of Prigozhin's mutiny and the subsequent dismemberment of the Wagner Group, the Kremlin has not abandoned the model. Instead, Wagner's state sponsors are learning from their mistakes and remain convinced that the Wagner model of semi-state PMC employment carries far more benefits than risks if managed properly.

To better understand exactly how the Kremlin is learning from its mistakes, this paper has charted the historical predecessors, evolution, and future outlook of the Wagner Group. By exploring how the Wagner Group and its state sponsors modernized Soviet and Russian employment of surrogates, this report sheds light on how future semi-state organizations might learn from and modify the Wagner model in a post-Wagner Russia. The report has also examined three case studies—Ukraine (2014-15), Syria and CAR (2015-23), and Ukraine (2022-23)—to showcase the high degree of case-by-case variation in the Wagner Group's tactics, recruitment methods, coordination with the Russian MoD, and relationships with local governments. Considering these case studies, the report challenges the oversimplified portrayals of the Wagner Group that have too often dominated media coverage of the organization.

The history of private and semi-private force in modern Russia has been one of trial and error. At every step of the way, the Kremlin has declined the opportunity to provide clear legal frameworks for PMCs, preferring to use formally illegal armed organizations as surrogates for the Russian military and intelligence services in an increasingly wide array of contexts. While the initial allure of these groups was the opportunity to operate under the cover of a durable plausible deniability suited to the unique challenges of 21st century warfare, Yevgeny

Prigozhin's management of the Wagner Group showcased the true potential of semi-state PMCs, which reaches far beyond plausible deniability.

In the aftermath of Prigozhin's rebellion, the Wagner model was not abandoned, which indicates that despite the immense risks posed by the model, the Kremlin still sees significant value in the use of semi-state PMCs and volunteer formations to support force mobilization in Ukraine and strategic competition in Africa. The Wagner model has been altered in important ways to reduce the risks posed by the principal-agent problem, and while it is too early to tell how newer structures like BARS and PMC Redut will develop, it appears that the Russian state has managed to salvage much of the Wagner empire in Africa, even in Prigozhin's absence. This required preserving much of the existing Wagner leadership on the local level, but without Prigozhin's centralized leadership, it is unlikely that any of Wagner's regional managers will pose a threat to the Kremlin. This is especially true after Prigozhin's death, which made a clear statement to any ambitious Wagner commanders or managers who might wish to fill his shoes.

Western policymakers should be prepared for the Wagner model to expand in a new, decentralized form that will complicate attribution and limit the ability of Western governments to respond to Russian malign influence, especially in Africa. While the Wagner Group is most famous for its military activities, some of its most impressive achievements have been in the information space, especially in the Central African Republic. The media organizations and cultural centers established in CAR will likely serve as templates for similar operations in other countries where the Kremlin senses openings to gain political influence and establish new revenue streams.

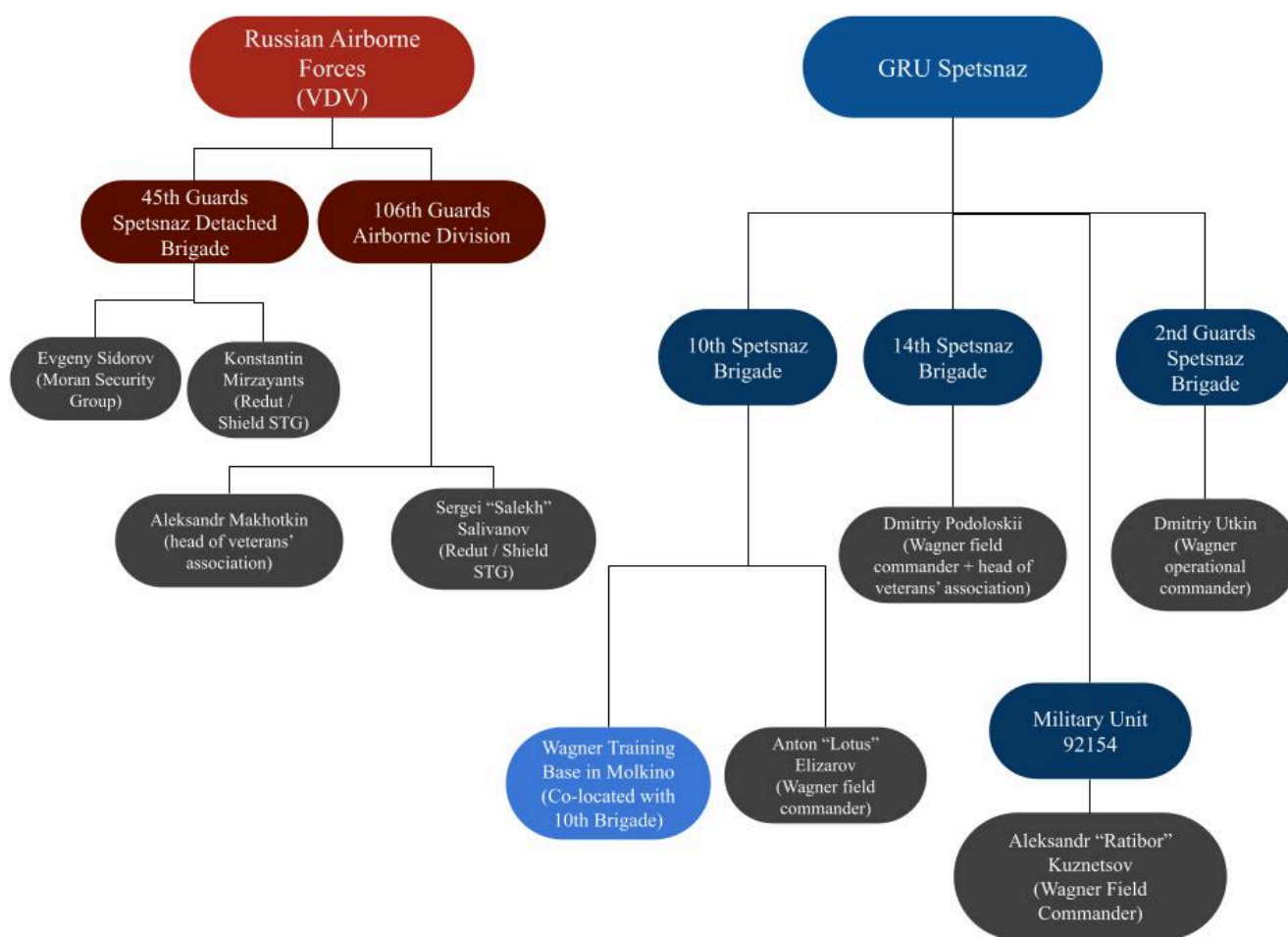
Russia's war in Ukraine has introduced a variety of challenges for the Russian state, but there is no indication that the Kremlin intends to scale back on efforts to pursue strategic competition on a global scale. The Wagner Group may have stopped making headlines after Prigozhin's death, but the role of semi-state military formations in Russian foreign policy continues to increase, as the Kremlin seeks to maintain a steady influx of volunteer fighters for its war in Ukraine and preserve relationships with African governments. The Russian state learned important lessons from the Wagner mutiny and is convinced that by decentralizing the model across a variety of

smaller groups, it can continue to reap the benefits while minimizing the risks. As Russia's war in Ukraine enters its third year, Russia's economy and military will be increasingly strained, creating the ideal conditions for the proliferation of smaller, Wagner-like groups that will be attractive alternatives to more overt and costly forms of foreign intervention.

Appendix 1: Russia's Spetsnaz formations

Russian Spetsnaz troops are often thought of as an analog to the US military's special operations forces (SOF), but there are important differences between the two. "Spetsnaz" is a contraction of *spetsialnoye naznacheniya*, meaning "special designation." This designation is applied to a handful of units in Russia's GRU, VDV, and Navy that receive specialized training and carry out particular tasks, traditionally emphasizing battlefield reconnaissance.²⁴⁷ During the Russian military's restructuring efforts that began in 2008, Spetsnaz troops have taken on a broader role, functioning as the Kremlin's "politico-military instrument of choice."²⁴⁸ These changes are reflected by the establishment of a new Special Operations Command (*komanda spetsialnogo naznacheniya*) known as "Senezh" that reports directly to the General Staff and focuses on counterterrorist operations, sabotage, and assassination.²⁴⁹

Figure 28. Representation of VDV and GRU Spetsnaz formations in Russian PMC and PSC management



Appendix 2: The Many “Reduts”

As mentioned in chapter three, “Redut” appears to be a label applied to a variety of separate formations, likely as a way to increase confusion and complicate sanctions. In a phone call with Sergei Salivanov (the Redut/Shield STG deputy manager) recorded in late 2022, he is audibly frustrated by the sudden emergence of multiple “Reduts.”²⁵⁰ He claims that “there are something like eight ‘Reduts.’ We don’t even understand how many ‘Reduts’ are operating right now... they’re being created like mushrooms.”²⁵¹ He goes on to list the locations of various “Reduts” that he knows about: Khimki, Krasnodar, Tambov, and Rostov. The most likely explanation for Salivanov’s confusion is that the GRU has taken the “Redut” label for its own quasi-PMC recruiting project, which uses “PMC Redut” as a catch-all brand to attract recruits for a variety of illegal armed formations fighting in Ukraine. The GRU’s 16th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade, which has been identified as the main curator of this project,²⁵² is located in Tambov, one of the cities mentioned by Salivanov.

A simple keyword search of “Redut” in the Russian Unified State Register of Legal Entities returns 487 results. Of course, some of these are legitimate businesses, but dozens of them are at least nominally connected to the private force market, such as “Redut Security Service,” several veterans organizations, a professional training school for private security specialists, and a variety of LLCs listed as “Private Security Agency” or “Private Security Organization,” followed by “Redut” and a letter or number.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ The leaked phone call can be found [here](#), with the relevant comments beginning at 33:30.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² “Схемы” and “Система”, “Уловка ‘Редут’: Как ГРУ создало фантомную ЧВК для вербовки тысяч россиян на войну в Украине,” *Настоящее Время*, December 1, 2023.

²⁵³ In order, the registration numbers for the three “Reduts” mentioned are: 1097746250040, 1207800051580, and 1213800009851.

Figure 29. Corporate listings of LLCs listed as “Private Security Company/Organization Redut”

475.	ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ "ЧАТНОЕ ОХРАННОЕ АГЕНТСТВО "РЕДУТ-С"	ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫПИСКУ
	420108, РЕСПУБЛИКА ТАТАРСТАН, КАЗАНЬ ГОРОД, ПОРТОВАЯ УЛИЦА, 1, ОГРН: 1031622504110, Дата присвоения ОГРН: 17.01.2003, ИНН: 1655060041, КПП: 165501001, Дата прекращения деятельности: 10.07.2006	
476.	ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ЧАСТНАЯ ОХРАННАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ АГЕНТСТВО БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ "РЕДУТ-4"	ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫПИСКУ
	142714, МОСКОВСКАЯ ОБЛАСТЬ, ВИДНОЕ ГОРОД, БОГДАНИХА ДЕРЕВНЯ, КРАСНАЯ СЛОБОДА УЛИЦА, ДОМ УЧ 66/2 60А, КОРП 60А, ОГРН: 1075003007970, Дата присвоения ОГРН: 21.09.2007, ИНН: 5003069722, КПП: 500301001, ГЕНЕРАЛЬНЫЙ ДИРЕКТОР: Ерофеева Анна Юрьевна	
477.	ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ЧАСТНАЯ ОХРАННАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ "РЕДУТ-ЗАЩИТА 1"	ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫПИСКУ
	115230, ГОРОД МОСКВА, КАШИРСКОЕ ШОССЕ, ДОМ ЭК1СТР2, ОГРН: 1167746879410, Дата присвоения ОГРН: 20.09.2016, ИНН: 7724382477, КПП: 772401001, ГЕНЕРАЛЬНЫЙ ДИРЕКТОР: Бобылев Андрей Владимирович	
478.	ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ЧАСТНАЯ ОХРАННАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ "АГЕНТСТВО БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ "РЕДУТ-4".	ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫПИСКУ
	107113, ГОРОД МОСКВА, ПЕСОЧНЫЙ ПЕРЕУЛОК, 3, ОГРН: 1027700105157, Дата присвоения ОГРН: 12.08.2002, ИНН: 7701276539, КПП: 771801001, Генеральный директор: Кожухов Алексей Вадимович	
479.	ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ "ПРОИЗВОДСТВЕННО-СТРОИТЕЛЬНАЯ КОМПАНИЯ РЕДУТ-ГРАНД"	ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫПИСКУ
	105523, ГОРОД МОСКВА, ПАРКОВАЯ 16-Я УЛИЦА, 5, 3 СТР.1, ОГРН: 1077764366239, Дата присвоения ОГРН: 22.12.2007, ИНН: 7719202337, КПП: 771901001, Руководитель: Слободяник Петр Алексеевич, Дата прекращения деятельности: 22.12.2007	
480.	ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ЧАСТНОЕ ОХРАННОЕ ПРЕДПРИЯТИЕ РЕДУТ-5	ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫПИСКУ
	123557, ГОРОД МОСКВА, ТИШИНСКИЙ Б. ПЕРЕУЛОК, 38, ОГРН: 5147746140416, Дата присвоения ОГРН: 24.09.2014, ИНН: 7703205540, КПП: 770301001, Руководитель юридического лица: Юшкевич Илья	

Interestingly, one of the several listings for “Redut Security” (Редут безопасность) is registered to none other than Evgeny Sidorov, a veteran of the VDV’s 45th Brigade and staffing specialist for Moran Security who was arrested on anti-mercenary charges alongside Vadim Gusev in 2013. To complicate the picture even further, the corporate registry for Sidorov’s “Redut Security,” lists “maintenance and repair of motor vehicles” as its primary business activity.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Typically, legal fronts for quasi-PMCs describe their main form of business as some sort of consulting, making Sidorov’s company a peculiar outlier.

Figure 30. Primary business activity of Sidorov’s “Redut Security”²⁵⁵

Сведения о видах экономической деятельности по Общероссийскому классификатору видов экономической деятельности		
Сведения об основном виде деятельности (ОКВЭД ОК 029-2014 (КДЕС Ред. 2))		
52	Код и наименование вида деятельности	45.20 Техническое обслуживание и ремонт автотранспортных средств
53	ГРН и дата внесения в ЕГРЮЛ записи, содержащей указанные сведения	2207703373590 02.04.2020

This tactic may seem primitive, but it has already proved to be highly effective in dodging sanctions and increasing overall confusion surrounding any discussion of “PMC Redut.” The European Union announced its intention to sanction Redut in late 2023 for war crimes in Ukraine, but it appears that they picked the wrong “Redut” as their target. A report by the Russian-language outlet *Nastoyashee Vremya* notes that the legal entity identified in the EU’s draft sanctions list is Sidorov’s “Redut Security,” which is not the same entity as the “PMC Redut” recruiting structure used by the GRU in Ukraine.²⁵⁶ However, the authors of the *Current Time* report conflate Sidorov’s Redut with Mirzayants’s Redut that operates on behalf of Gennadi Timchenko in Syria, which shows the real difficulty of pinning down one particular legal entity as a sanctions target when dozens of formations (some legal PSCs, others illegal PMCs) are calling themselves “Redut.”

²⁵⁵ ОГРН: 1197746727530

²⁵⁶ Елизавета Сурначева, Даниил Беловодьев, and investigative teams “Схемы” and “Система.” “Евросоюз введет санкции против ЧВК “Редут” из-за покушения на Зеленского. Однако выбранное юрлицо вряд ли спонсирует наемников на войне.” *Настоящее Время*, December 1, 2023.